BACK STAGE

ROLAND OLIVER

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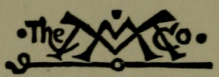
A STORY OF THE THEATER



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BACK STAGE

A STORY OF THE THEATER

BY

ROLAND OLIVER

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1924

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To
MY MOTHER

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CHAPTER I.

MISS MARGUERITE TAYLOR, OF STILLWATER, KENTUCKY, AND MR. PETER F. MILLARD, OF LONDON, ENGLAND, AIM FOR THE SAME OBJECTIVE.

AT about the same time that Mr. Peter F. Millard left Southampton, England, for New York, Miss Marguerite Taylor, with fire in her eye, left Stillwater, Kentucky, for the same objective. Miss Taylor and Mr. Millard were serenely unconscious of the race; and, indeed, were as serenely unconscious of each other's existence.

Mr. Millard's object in coming to New York was to consummate a life-long ambition, of which more later. Miss Taylor came for the expressed purpose of wreaking vengeance on whoever it was who had stolen her Big Idea and planted it profitably in a Broadway theater.

Marguerite Taylor was bursting with big ideas. With them she had shocked and even shaken the Stillwater Eagle, which daily paper she had faithfully served for three years before impulsively and finally leaving it flat, as she herself phrased it. Marguerite was born in Stillwater of parents similarly born and so on for many generations. There was even a Taylor Street in that

beautiful little city which Marguerite regarded with something of a sense of proprietorship, quite unjustified by the facts. For she did not own a foot of Stillwater real estate, nor did her Aunt Minerva with whom she lived; nor any other of the contemporary Taylor tribe except Tom Dutton, a second cousin who was only Taylor on his mother's side and therefore did not count.

The salient facts of Marguerite's existence were relatively few. Left an orphan at the age of three by the tragic extinction of her parents in a railroad accident, she was taken in by Aunt Minerva, who had no children of her own, and quite properly, being a confirmed spinster. As Marguerite grew older she vaguely realized that Aunt Minerva's state in life was altogether appropriate; she did not deserve to have children of her own, seeing the severity with which she guided the erring footsteps of the child whom accident had thrust into her care.

Aunt Minerva meant to be kind, but it was so long since she had herself been a little girl that she had entirely forgotten the little girl's point of view. So Marguerite's formative years were largely composed of prohibitions. Candy was bad for her. Romping was bad for her and especially bad for the little white frocks she wore. Any sort of pleasure, in fact, seemed to Aunt Minerva to be a weakness of the flesh and sternly to be repressed.

Up to the age of sixteen Marguerite refrained, under compulsion, from doing pretty nearly everything she wanted to. At that age she graduated spectacularly from the high school with a diploma and flowers and congratulations. Feeling exceedingly grown up in consequence she issued a declaration of independence. She decided that she would prefer to earn her own living

and live her own life and told Aunt Minerva so in terms that permitted of no misunderstanding. She had taken the commercial course and felt equipped to fight her own battles. Since earning one's own living could not, in Aunt Minerva's mind, be classified even remotely as a form of pleasure, Aunt Minerva surrendered.

Marguerite accepted a position with Mr. Farquhar, the hardware man and at the end of three weeks decided that she did not care for hardware. She then, in turn, accepted positions with Mr. Logan, the attorney; Mr. Calhoun, the bookstore man and Mr. Davis, of the Stillwater Hotel. She regretted leaving Mr. Calhoun because there were several promising books in his stock which she hadn't as yet found time to read, but Mr. Calhoun himself suggested a severance of their business relations. He hinted that he had hired her to sell books, not to read them. She was willing to argue the point, but he would not listen to reason.

Like the others, the hotel job proved to be impermanent. When, therefore, Marguerite reported for the third time in four months that she was again out of work, Aunt Minerva stepped into the breach. Cousin Tom Dutton, publisher and proprietor of the Stillwater Eagle was appealed to and agreed to take on his vivacious relative as office girl, stenographer and society reporter. In her latter capacity she managed to square three or four grudges in a single issue and the Eagle was threatened with lawsuits. Repeated warnings ultimately subdued although they did not destroy her spirit. Marguerite merely bided her time.

After two years of monotonous service on the Eagle, she was appointed musical editor, the occasion being the forming of an oratorio and choral society. The Eagle regarded music as an effeminate art akin to society

reporting. When, a short time later, the Palace Nickelodeon was converted into an Opera House and third-rate companies began visiting her home town, Marguerite became dramatic critic. She saw many shows and these inspired her with the conviction that she was intended for an actress; but as no opportunity presented itself to test the authenticity of this conviction, she diverted her ambition into channels of playwriting. With infinite labor and much time which should have been devoted to the Eagle, she achieved a highly original drama in seven acts and fifteen scenes.

Aunt Minerva reluctantly consented to hear the play read aloud, but at the conclusion of the fifth act the reading was discontinued by mutual consent. Aunt Minerva, to whom the theater was anathema, expressed the opinion that of all the rubbishy trash she had ever heard . . . etc. . . . etc. . . . and Marguerite announced that under the circumstances she was willing to call it a day. But she got busy and organized an amateur dramatic society, got herself elected president and chose for the initial presentation her own masterpiece, with Miss Marguerite Taylor in the leading feminine part.

Rehearsals developed unsurmountable difficulties in the matter of the fifteen scenes, each one of which was elaborate and expensive. Also several of the cast complained that their parts did not make sense and suggested "Among the Breakers" as a solution. Marguerite thereupon withdrew her manuscript and her membership, in spite of which the dramatic society persisted and finally presented "Among the Breakers." Its late president's acid review of the performance was caught by the city editor in time for suppression and once more was Marguerite warned.

Then came a thrilling day when she was assigned

to interview Miss Regina De Leon, a touring star, who was to make her Stillwater debut that evening. At the conclusion of the interview proper Marguerite timidly mentioned that she was the author of a little play and wistfully wondered if Miss De Leon would read it and express her unbiased judgment. Having in view the forthcoming interview and its possible beneficent effect on that night's business, Miss De Leon sighed and consented. Marguerite caught her the next morning as she was leaving the hotel for the train and received back her precious manuscript.

"My Dear!" exclaimed Miss De Leon, who expected never to return to Stillwater and could afford to be candid. "Whatever made you do it? Your play is utterly im-possible. It would take a fortune to produce and an entirely new sort of stage would have to be invented. Your characters do nothing but talk and jabber. They never come alive."

"B—but the plot? The idea?" ventured poor Marguerite, holding back tears of disappointment.

"What's a plot?" demanded Miss De Leon. "Plots don't matter; it's the manner, not the matter that counts. No, Dear. Tear up your silly little play and try a novel."

So Marguerite tore up her silly little play and gave up all thoughts of a career as a dramatist. Then, ages later, it seemed, she caught a review of "The Woman Understands" in a New York paper for which the Eagle subscribed. It had only three acts and a single setting comprised the scenery, but, item for item, as nearly as she could judge, "The Woman Understands" was a reincarnation of her destroyed drama!

She drew one-hundred-and-eighty-seven dollars from the savings bank, took a bath, put on her best gown and

hat, and left a hurried note for Aunt Minerva and caught the 11:36, east-bound. The Stillwater Eagle still awaits the formal resignation of Miss Marguerite Taylor.

Arrived in New York Marguerite found, first, a hotel and then the theater where "The Woman Understands" was enjoying prosperity. Her suspicions were more than justified. They had taken her story bodily and woven it into a play which, she confessed to herself as she watched it, was far beyond anything she could ever achieve, but which, nevertheless, would never have been written at all if it had not been for her own despised script.

Marguerite was fortunate in the selection of an attorney. He had grown daughters of his own. He listened patiently while she blurted out the story of the outrage and her determination to secure justice, even if it took every cent of a hundred dollars, and then kindly broke the intelligence that her case was worse than hopeless. She had no protection, not even a manuscript. There was nothing she could do except bow to an unkind fate and return to Stillwater.

Returning to Stillwater, beaten, was the very last thing that Marguerite had visualized. New York seemed to be a highly promising town. The morning paper had a lot of ads for stenographers in its want columns. She decided to try her luck.

Within a week Marguerite found herself the occupant of a furnished room in the Greenwich Village section of town; also the occupant of a nice typewriter desk in an importing house within walking distance. Within a month she was a New Yorker. Within six she was a confirmed Villager and was up to her eyebrows in a new and tentative enterprise of a semi-professional theatrical nature. She found herself among a queer lot,

some of whom were not altogether "nice." But Marguerite, with two hundred years of Taylor tradition in her blood, kept herself sweet and clean, even if she did come to smoke cigarettes and to say "damn" when the occasion seemed to warrant.

CHAPTER II.

MR. PETER FILLMORE MILLARD, OF LONDON, ENGLAND, FULFILLS HIS DESTINY AS AN HEREDITARY AMERICAN.

AS far back as he could remember it had been impressed on the mind and consciousness of Peter Fillmore Millard that he was by way of being a member of the American Royal Family. It appeared that a tremendously great aunt of a former century had gone to America and a grand-daughter of hers, by marrying a gentleman farmer of the name of Nathaniel Fillmore, became the mother of Millard Fillmore, who was the thirteenth president of the United States, and there you had it.

Peter, born in his grandfather's house in Kent, always regarded himself as an American rather than an Englishman. During his childhood a great deal of stress was laid on the Fillmore connection and no stress at all on any other connection. He gradually came to understand that his father had been a Bad Lot. Indeed, his mother, grandfather Millard's youngest daughter, had resumed her paternal home and her maiden name shortly before Peter arrived.

When he entered this life his mother departed it and little Peter was an orphan, in fact, although he felt as if he had at least half a dozen fathers and as many mothers. They were only his uncles and aunts, but his earlier years were distributed impartially among them, so that he had a jolly lot of homes of his own, with Grandfather's

as a central station; a shipping point, so to speak. Most of these uncles and aunts were variously married and settled, but somehow there was a paucity of cousins. It was among the childless couples that Peter spent most of his time, acting as proxy for children who had not seen fit to be born, and being, of course, thoroughly petted. Some of the uncles and aunts were only relatives by marriage, but Peter made no nice distinctions.

Since even the relatives by marriage appeared to be proud of the Millard Fillmore distinction it was no great wonder that Peter was inculcated with the importance of it. He learned to include in his nightly prayers a petition for the safety and health of his cousins in America, although no one really knew if he actually had any. Still, it was well to be on the safe side.

So Peter, English born and bred, was an American in his heart. He carried with him on his family rounds a tiny American flag, which formed a part of the decorative scheme of whatever sleeping quarters he occupied. Every Fourth of July he formally and gravely saluted it and on one such occasion when taunted by a neighboring playmate with being a damned Yankee, he hotly characterized the other as a damned Britisher and the War of the Revolution was fought all over again on a minute scale, so that Peter bled for his country, through the nose, and being sturdier than the other boy, achieved another Yorktown.

Ultimately the sheltered lad reached his majority and came into his property. This consisted of a life interest in the estate of a fond but deceased maiden aunt, which provided him with some four hundred pounds a year, not enough to support him in idleness in the style to which he had been accustomed, but enough to permit him to take his own time in choosing a career. He promptly

decided to take up his life in the land of his collateral descent and his sentiment, and his first responsible act on becoming his own master with a quarter's income in his pocket was to purchase first-class transportation on a Cunarder. Then he secured a few letters of introduction to influential people in the United States. One was to George J. Belford in a place called Waco, Texas, and another was to Alfred E. Higginson in Portland, Oregon.

Peter changed his pounds into a jolly big lot of American dollars. It was gratifying the number of dollars one could get for a pound; nearly five of them, by George! He visualized his income as becoming magically quintupled as soon as he set foot in New York, an estimate which, however, he found it prudent to revise not long after his landing.

The letters to Mr. Belford in Waco and Mr. Higginson in Portland were never presented. He found his adopted country to be disconcertingly large. But if he did not meet Messrs. Belford and Higginson, he did make the valuable acquaintance of Mr. Otto Reilly, a typical Yankee, born of an Irish father and a German mother in Providence, Rhode Island. It was one of those sudden ship-board intimacies and began in a discussion as to which of the two was the more seasick. They occupied adjoining deck chairs and Mr. Reilly appeared to be the greater sufferer, but that was because of his larger capacity for emotion. In reality Peter was just as ill. Both recovered at about the same time and the demonstrative German-Irish-American found an attractive counterbalance in the reserved young Briton, so that the friendship lasted beyond the landing.

Through the efforts of Mr. Reilly, who took him in charge and behaved rather as if he were Uncle Sam himself, entertaining a guest, Peter managed to make the

grade to the dizzy heights of cub reporter on one of New York's morning newspapers, a journal inclined to be a bit pro-British. Reilly was high up in the advertising business, beyond the most ambitious dreams of mere journalism, but he figured that the reporting game was a convenient stepping-stone to some really worth-while occupation.

The Morning Guardian had a number of Englishmen on its staff and Peter found himself in congenial company. He confided to the city editor his desire to become a full-fledged American citizen at the earliest opportunity and some of his reasons therefor. His serene claim to relationship with a somewhat obscured president led to his being unmercifully "kidded" by the newsroom, where he became known as " 'is royal American 'ighness." Having a sense of humor more prevalent among the English than they receive credit for from the native sons, of, say, Nashua, New Hampshire, Peter accepted the "ragging," as he called it, with unruffled good nature. They liked him for it.

A good fairy in the person of Mr. Reilly thus planted Peter squarely on his feet without undue delay in a position for which he found himself fairly well adapted and the young Briton with the Yankee heart escaped without knowing it the agonizing, discouraging, uphill struggle, common to the greenhorn in New York. His fresh, unclouded point of view as of a visitor from another world made itself agreeably manifest in his unhackneyed "copy." He learned to write smoothly, with no more difficulty than he mastered the newsroom typewriter. So at twenty-one, a stranger in a beloved land and all but friendless, we see Peter Fillmore Millard modest without being timid, pleasant mannered without being demonstrative, unblinkingly accepting as quite the

usual thing a congenial job at $45 a week, with no worries of any sort and a bland confidence in the future.

He started his newspaper career with routine "leg work" and was happy both in its assignments and in the brusque sympathy of his city editor. He quickly learned the geography of the big city and he had no prejudices to overcome. Never a Briton in his own imagination he escaped the punishment which a condescending manner would inevitably have called down on him. He not only admitted that America was the greatest country on God's green earth, but became mildly aggressive in argument with foreign-born members of the staff, proclaiming that such was the undubitable fact in the face of silly contrary assertions.

Since his earliest recollection Peter had always felt a particular love for the theater. At the age of nine he became the sole proprietor and manager of a theater fully three feet high, imported from France and with a large cast of porcelain puppets. He wrote an original play for them, which his fond uncles and aunts declared to be as good as Mr. Pinero himself, everything considered. Later, given his choice of diversion, the playhouse invariably won. He spent his pocket money for the Drama to the exclusion of more boy-like pleasures. Finally he got to haunting stage alleys to see the players come out after the matinee and wondered if they were indeed mere humans, subject to toothache and colds in the head in common with mankind. It followed that in his later teens he read many printed plays and these gave him the beginnings of an itch to write. But they were only beginnings, unidentified longings, and Peter did not actually recognize them until he was assigned, one fortunate evening, to "cover" a performance given in the Greenwich Village district by an organization of

semi-amateurs which was beginning an aimless sort of struggle for recognition.

But the awakening of Peter deserves a paragraph by itself.

CHAPTER III.

STILLWATER, KENTUCKY, MEETS LONDON, ENGLAND, AND THEREBY HANGS THE BEGINNING OF A FRIENDLY ADVENTURE.

THE theater had once been either a barn or storeroom. The floor was flat and level and makeshift folding chairs nailed together in rows on boards served for seats. A tiny stage at one end of the room was veiled by coarse buckram curtains. No attempt had been made at decoration. Certainly there was no distracting element to divert the eye.

It was a queer sort of audience. Many wore spectacles and there was a stuffy atmosphere suggestive of infrequent bathing. To Peter the predominating note was a certain air of importance, at once comic and sententious, which was solemnly maintained by the hundred or so men and women in the auditorium. He detected a sort of uneasiness as of a hen about to cackle over a portentous egg; and, sure enough, soon the curtains were jerkily drawn back and, behold, there was an egg of a sort, half theatrical, half significant, clumsy and yet with a groping purpose, and the cackling which followed was exultant and strident.

"How in the world," thought Peter, "can these people contrive a combination so gloriously good and terribly rotten at the same time?"

Reflection showed him that this remarkable effect was

the result of a bright initial idea in conjunction with slipshod execution. There was a blind striving away from conventions which sometimes went to the length of absurdity. The little plays he witnessed that evening betrayed the joy of creation allied to a lazy disinclination to take pains. The acting, on the other hand, was surprisingly even. There was a preponderance of short hair among the women, although one girl with a glorious dark red mane stood out prominently. The players on the whole managed to combine intensity with discretion and performed with a quality of poise that was distinctly lacking in the work of their authors.

The secret of this came out after the performance. Peter was the only newspaper man there. The girl who took tickets at the door was duly impressed when he told her he was from the Guardian and summoned a gum-chewing young person in abbreviated skirts to usher the distinguished guest to an aisle chair. The seats were not reserved, the audience disposing themselves where they liked or where they could after choices were exhausted. Between plays they circulated about and Peter proceeded to circulate, too.

"Excuse me," bleated a shrimp of a man to Peter, who was headed for the tiny lobby, cigarette in hand, "but ain't you the man from the Guardian? I thought so. I hope you will like our little show. The first piece wasn't so rotten, now, was it?"

Here the shrimp committed a grave breach of ethics. It is the unwritten law of the theater that the producer who has expended money, energy, sleepless nights and nerve force on a play and who naturally hangs on the verdict of a first-night inquest with desperate eagerness, shall on no account pry into the mind of the attending critics, but wait with as much patience as he may their

printed reports. In the same manner the critics must under no circumstances do the natural thing and tell the tortured producer what they think of it, but preserve an impenetrable calm. The little man, however, did not know this, nor, for the matter of that, did Peter, so the bad break went unnoticed. Peter expressed the opinion that the idea of the first piece was corking and the performance uncommonly good for amateurs—but——

The little man interrupted to introduce himself as Moe Levanski, business manager of the organization; was very pleased to meet Mr. Millard and suggested that Mr. Millard permit himself to be exhibited back stage to our young artists after the show was over.

"I want you to meet 'em and tell 'em what you've told me," explained Mr. Levanski, "which is absolutely encouraging, you know. And especially I want you should meet our Mr. Birmingham, who is our stage director and an actor in his own line, and I hope your write-up in the Guardian will be up to the sample you've handed me."

So at the conclusion of the curious performance Peter found himself on the tiny stage back of the closed buckram curtains, with Mr. Levanski doing the honors. There he met Miss Marguerite Taylor, the clever girl with the glorious hair, Miss Helen Robbins, formerly Rabinski, who had failed to change her profile with her name, and and especially he met Mr. Reginald Birmingham, the actor in his own line, who, it became obvious to Peter, was also a devotee of Bacchus, which might explain how it came he was directing amateurs instead of practicing his trade.

They were all very friendly and somewhat flustered at rubbing elbows with a critic of the Guardian, even a third assistant critic, and the ladies hoped coyly that he would not roast them too hard, but remember that it

was all in the name of Art for Art's sake. Peter mentally recalled the night city editor's estimate of the news value of the assignment, which was "about a hundred words," and secretly feared that the Community Players would be disappointed when they read tomorrow morning's paper. And this recalled, in turn, the chronic desirability of early copy, so he tore himself away from his new friends, promising to drop in again soon, and hurried to the office.

The hundred words had been written and shot to the composing room and Peter was chatting with the night city editor, who found his conversation refreshing. The city edition had gone to press and the staff were hustling into overcoats, but the night city editor, as a virtuous example, was never in a hurry to go home.

"Say," he mused, after Peter had recounted with a touch of whimsical humor, his experience of the evening, "that wouldn't make bad Sunday magazine section stuff. I'll mention it to Brown and maybe he'll give you an artist and you can do a half page between you with some zippy pictures. Brown might let you sign it, if it's real good."

Brown was the Sunday editor and the idea appealed to him. So a few evenings later Peter and a pen-and-ink man named Burrows fared forth to the crazy little theater, where Peter was greeted as an old friend by Mr. Levanski, the young woman on the door and the bobbed-haired gum chewer who had originally ushered him to his seat. It was the same bill, but Peter enjoyed it more than he had on the first hearing. Burrows, at his side, kept whispering, "say, this is rich!" and worked furiously with roughly penciled "notes."

On this occasion there was no need of hurrying away. Once more Peter held court back stage. If the players

were disappointed at the space they had received in Tuesday's paper they were tactful enough to dwell lightly on the fact and when he announced that he was going to "do" a Sunday story, with sketches by Mr. Burrows, they were openly delighted.

"I tell you what," breathed the heavily-laden Mr. Birmingham, "wait till my boys and girls have washed up and we'll all have a nice lil' executive session at the Dutchman's; sort of a love-feast, you know, and you can get the story of our young lives. Everybody, attention!" he called, clapping his hands loudly. "As soon as you're washed up come around to the Dutchman's private room. Everybody get that?"

Apparently everybody had and Birmingham marshaled Peter and Burrows as an advance guard with himself to notify the Dutchman's of the forthcoming party.

It was the usual New York corner saloon with a "ladies' entrance" leading to a large back room partitioned off from the bar. Owgoost, as Birmingham called the proprietor, was on hand in person. He was genially glad to meet the newspaper boys and promised wonders in the way of an impromptu repast.

"A round of Martinis mit some clems, yes? Caviar and anchovies, rye bread mit limburger and roquefort, yes? Nice hot dogs mit sauerkraut, yes. I fix you up."

As a preliminary, Birmingham, who did not need one, suggested an immediate round of cocktails. By the time these were mixed and consumed the Community Players began to dribble into the back room and the advance guard joined them. There was a large, round, old-fashioned walnut table and this was quickly equipped, by a young German who presided over the lunch counter, with wooden-handled knives and forks and extremely durable crockery.

When they had all arrived a laughing controversy arose, over which girls should sit next to Peter. There were five girls and Peter, it was observed, was equipped with only two sides. Here Mr. Burrows expressed desperate jealousy and two of the ladies, wise in their diplomacy, seeing that he was to draw the pictures, attached themselves to him.

"The head of the table is where Reginald Birmingham sits, by God," announced that individual, "and Mr.—now —I say, Old Man, let's can this Mister and Miss stuff. It don't go in the village. Our friend Peter will sit to the right of Birmingham and—what's the name?—Charley Burrows will sit at the left of ditto Birmy. Charley don't drink, so there's method in me madness, as the poet says. Come on, boys and girls, let's be seated and damned be he who first cries hold! Enough!"

Birmingham was just tipsy enough to banish restraint and not enough to be a nuisance. The formal pose of the players for the benefit of the newspaper men dissolved with the round of cocktails. With the appearance of beer came a tacit abandonment of the conventions. Peter was publicly proclaimed a Regular Guy by Miss Taylor, who invited him to call her Marguerite. Miss Robbins, formerly Rabinski, who had squirmed into the seat at Peter's right, by virtue of tactical position garnered a kiss and paraded her victory.

"Say, listen, you dove-eyed darlings," commanded the stage director, "stop vamping our honored guests for a minute. That'll keep. They got telephone numbers—hey, boys? Write 'em down pretty and behave your lil' selves for awhile. I want to announce as the first speaker of the evening, Mr. Peter Hoozis, dramatic cricket of the Morning Guardian, who will respond to the toast: 'The Community Players; what-in-'ell ails 'em?' "

Birmingham smiled tipsily at Peter.

"Go on, Son—hand it to us. We know how good we are; now you tell us how rotten we are. That's what we need."

Peter's knees were a trifle unsteady from nervousness as he arose, encouraged by a babel of invitation. But once he had swung into his stride, after a timid and halting start, he found to his surprise that he could think clearly on his feet and give fairly smooth utterance to his thoughts. According to instructions, he "handed it to them." It was keen constructive criticism, for the theater was Peter's old stamping ground and he knew whereof he spoke. He sympathized with their zeal to plough fallow fields and destroy hampering conventions, but warned them that form was absolutely necessary in art, no matter how superior to it some persons might regard themselves.

"And I find," he went on, "that it is your playwrights who disregard form, rather than your players. I suspect that your excellent stage director deserves the credit. He is, if I may be permitted the phrase, a corker. He isn't blinded by tradition and yet, by George, he is keen enough to realize that when one form is discarded another form must be just as definitely created to take its place.

"I fear," said Peter, smiling, "that here in the well-known Village I shall be pilloried for maintaining that unregulated inspiration is tommyrot. The painter is not superior to established laws of drawing and color; the musician is not superior to rules of thorough harmony and counterpoint and neither is the writer superior to whatever form his medium takes."

"Wrong! All wrong!" interjected a stubby gentleman who needed a shave. Also he needed a haircut and a new

suit of clothes and a bath, Peter thought, as he turned toward him. The stubby one proved to be the author of the third playlet of the present bill.

"Art to BE art must be unfettered," he added, and to sounds of "hush" he glared mildly through rubber-tired spectacles.

Birmingham whispered to the orator that his interruptor was Lawrence Crane and Peter, duly enlightened, thereupon addressed him directly:

"I suppose you will grant, Mr. Crane, that writing as you do, in English, you are guided by the rules and usages of English. I thought so. Then in writing plays should you not be guided by recognized rules of dramatic construction?"

"Such as—what?" demanded Mr. Crane with the air of "now I've got you."

"Well," said Peter, reflectively, "the rules of cumulative interest, character development, elimination of non-essentials and so forth."

"Rot," groaned Mr. Crane. "You'd perpetuate the commonplaces of such carpenters as Sardou and exterminate all self-expression that didn't fit machine-made specifications."

"Oh, surely not!"

"Did you ever write a play?"

"No," confessed Peter, "I never did."

"Then," retorted Crane, "you don't know what you're talking about." He turned a weary shoulder.

"Peter is right!" cried Birmingham. "Play has got to have directness and all those other things. You got to know where you're at every minute. You got to have a purpose for every word you write. The boy's right and don't I know it! Trying to get over a lot of slush that doesn't mean anything by *making* it mean something.

That's my job and Larry Crane has me sweating blood putting sense into his bloody spineless scripts."

Peter, on his feet, blushed furiously. Mr. Birmingham must indeed be far gone in drink to use so dreadful an expression, openly and without shame. He felt sorry for the ladies, but noted with some astonishment that the ladies did not appear to be in the least sorry for themselves.

"Izzat so?" drawled Crane, stung by the stage director's taunt. "Well, I challenge our know-it-all English friend to sit down and write a play, any play, with his two-tums-two-make-four rules and still keep it unhackneyed, original and one-tenth as gripping as the bloody script of mine you played tonight."

Again the terrible word. Again it passed unnoticed.

"Take him up, Peter! You can do it!" came from Marguerite, the light of battle in her eyes.

Miss Robbins, now called by request, Helen, felt a momentary sense of lost opportunity in not having forestalled that red-haired cat in her championship of the fair-haired honey boy. Still she had won the first kiss, which was something. So now she arose and garnered a second, then putting a plump arm about Peter's convenient neck, she said:

"Write golden rings around him, Sweetie, and cast me for the lead. We'll show him!"

Birmingham glared balefully at Helen.

"I'll do the casting without any suggestions from kike amateurs," he barked.

And now Peter was startled. The ultra-objectionable word "bloody" had been taken as a matter of course by the company, but a perfectly harmless, coined word threw the members into angry resentment. Mr. Crane, Marguerite, Birmingham and the two guests were gen-

tiles, but the remaining four women and nine men were manifestly Jewish and they flashed a common look of oriental hate at the offending Birmingham.

There was an awkward silence. Peter and the twining Helen were standing. The others were hunched in their chairs. Helen slowly withdrew her plump arm from around his neck and regarded him with melodramatic intensity.

"Beat the head off that dirty loafer for me!" she commanded in a vibrant voice.

It was a deucedly uncomfortable situation for Peter. His purely voluntary lady-love was obviously seeking to consolidate her position by sending her unwilling gallant forth to battle. The day was saved by the arch-offender himself.

Birmingham was certainly less sober now than earlier in the evening, but he maintained a tolerably clear head and was naturally a quick thinker. As professional stage director of the Community Players he was the only regularly salaried member. It behooved him to keep in the good graces of his employers however much he might bully them in his professional capacity. He realized in a flash that he had deeply offended a substantial majority and he was quick to repair his fences. He lumbered to his feet, feigning a deeper intoxication than was actually his.

"Order — boys and girls — Order. Let me have the floor a minute," he pleaded to Peter, who sat down, leaving Helen of the high hand standing.

"I got an apology to make," Birmingham's voice had in it a low note of deep contrition. "A humble, sincere and abjec' apology. Gawd knows I love the Jewish people. My—now—grandmother was a Jew—" (this was the happy inspiration of the moment and quite unjustified

by facts)—"and I'm proud of it. Nobody can insult me by calling me a Jew. They're the finest race on earth!"

Miss Taylor, at this point, seemed bursting for speech, but restrained herself and Birmingham continued his striking impersonation of a person in the throes of remorse.

"Gawd knows I love the Jews," he repeated, "and why shouldn't I? They got the artistic temperament, they got the genius of soul expression, they got the delicate sensitiveness of the true artis'. Boys and girls, I guess I'm kinder soused or I couldn't have made that bad crack. I couldn't have insulted a sweet, talented, divinely gifted lil' lady like our frien' Helen. I'd sooner tear my tongue out by the roots than insult her. I love 'er, boys and girls, jus' as I love you all; Sadie and Marguerite and Ida and Daisy over there—I love 'em all. Oh, that a man should put an enemy into his mouth to steal away his brains, as Hamlet says—no, tha's from Othello—I apologize, humbly and contritely and from a full heart. Tha's all I got to say."

Birmingham's excellent voice broke and he furtively wiped away a non-existent tear as he sank heavily into his chair. Helen, real tears in her eyes, murmured, "It's all right, Birmy, I forgive you," and to prove it kissed Peter. "I knew you would stand up for me," she whispered, as if he had.

"It seems to me," said Marguerite, with a toss of her mane, "that this gush about the children of Israel has sidetracked some interesting and instructive remarks. If I'm wrong I'll join Birmy on the mourners' bench and apologize, but it seems to me Peter was making a lovely talk before he got kidnapped by Helen——"

"That's right," broke in one of the young men, "and I was waiting with bated breath until he got around to

me and pointed out all the wrong things Birmy makes me do. Go ahead, Peter."

The orator murmured that he had about finished, anyway and this they would not accept, but Peter was firm, not to say stubborn. His heart may have been American, but his characteristics were British. The thread of his thoughts had been broken and he felt that he had said enough.

"How about my challenge?" asked Crane, with the trace of a sneer.

"Oh, that? Let me see: I am to write a play—a one-act play, I take it—in accordance with established rules of dramatic construction and the play must be original and unhackneyed, eh, what?"

"That's the idea," agreed Crane.

"Well," said Peter, flushing slightly, "I will try to do that little thing. But who is to judge the play?"

"Our committee on plays will judge it," cried Marguerite, "and we'll produce it, too!"

"Hooray!" piped Burrows, the pen-and-ink man, an arm about each of the two ladies who had attached themselves to him. "I volunteer to paint the scenery."

"Speech! Speech!" sang Marguerite. "Constructive remarks on the symbolism of the suggestive in stage decoration are in order."

At this cue Birmingham rapped on his plate with his knife and introduced Mr. Charley Hoozis as the gifted art editor of the Guardian, which he was not, and Burrows, with a wink at Peter, got up and grinned amiably at the company.

"First thing I want to know," he began, "is the genius who dashed off the scenery I saw tonight, present and if so is he a bigger guy than I am?"

It appeared that the scenic artist was not present.

"Then," continued Burrows, "since he isn't here to defend himself and hand me a crack on the jaw, let me say that his stuff was pretty darned good. His green sky and blue and red trees in that 'Conscience of the Damned' piece were exactly as natural as the play itself."

Crane, author of "The Conscience of the Damned," gave an audible snort.

"If he was trying to be different," said Burrows, "he got what he was after, and that's all right, too. As I understand it, the locale of the play was some place that never existed, inhabited by people who never lived; the free, unfettered self-expression of an artistic soul uplifted by delirium tremens, a modest effort to achieve something that was never done before and, please God, will never be done again. Nature abhors a straight line and so did the artist who drew that house. The laws of gravitation are inartistic and color-blindness is a priceless gift. Well, all I have to say is that if my pal, Peter, writes a play and if I do the scenery for it, I'll try to make my picture match his script as harmoniously as that combination which thrilled me this evening."

Burrows sat down. The company, not especially strong on humor, applauded uncertainly. Marguerite was amused and Birmingham grinned tipsily, but Mr. Crane frowned in perplexity and the others also appeared to be a trifle mystified. Mystification was, however, one of their easiest poses.

"Well, boys and girls," yawned Birmingham from the recesses of his chair, "this concludes our regular program. You are invited to visit around and get acquainted or go home or do whatever you darn please." Whereupon he set an example and went to sleep.

There was a scraping of chairs and one or two left. Peter and Burrows would have sought their hats and

coats, but the remaining Community Players protested that it was early yet, not much past midnight. In the general shifting about Marguerite managed to capture Peter's free side. Helen maintained stubborn possession of the other side.

"What's your play going to be about?" Marguerite asked in confidential tones.

"I haven't the faintest idea," he replied. Now that he was definitely committed he felt rather uncertain about his ability to carry out his task. He expressed his fears.

"Don't get cold feet," she advised. "It'll be easy for you to get something good over. Think up some bizarre idea."

"Such as—what?" asked Peter, amused. He fancied he had her there.

"Oh," she mused, "anything out of the ordinary. Dramatize Adam and Eve with the original costumes. All our shrinking lady actors will be crazy to play Eve. Or you might dash off something spicy about Lady Godiva. If the pure nude doesn't strike your British fancy lay the scene at the North Pole in winter."

"How the deuce," thought Peter, "did she gather that I am British."

"For a happy medium," went on Marguerite, "you might have a Swede wood chopper attack a tree and the Hamadryad who belongs in the tree comes out and registers a kick, while the roughneck Swede teaches her how to love. Gosh; there are crazy ideas lying around loose all over the place. Dramatize yourself: A frigid Englishman on a desert south sea island meets a Fiji maid and tries to teach her etiquette."

"But, I say," protested Peter, "I am not a frigid Englishman. Far be it, my dear."

Marguerite favored him with a quizzical, challenging smile.

"Leave it to Helen," she said, "and you won't be that way long."

Helen, listening sullenly to the chat, flushed and looked angry, but remained silent. The level of the conversation was somewhat beyond her.

"She's one of those radicals," went on Marguerite smoothly, "who knows what she wants and goes after it. What she wants now is a certain person's—by the way, what IS your phone number? You'd look grand as the apex of a triangle. Helen of Troy got the apple from Paris, but Marguerite won Faust and here is your chance to double in two corking romantic leads."

It was silly banter, but it acted as a stimulant on Peter. He rather admired this girl, with her straight nose, her capable mouth and her hazel-green eyes. Her play of ideas had planted the germ of a plot for a one-act piece in his mind. The heavier Helen felt an ugly jealousy as she noted that his attention was all for Marguerite, a lightweight, frivolous cat who said smart and snippy things, but had no depths. So Helen thought. As for Helen, her depths were tremendous and she could act all around that red-head. Even Birmy had to admit that. Marguerite was superficially bright, but Helen was intense and emotional.

It was past two o'clock and the party spluttered out. Only the two newspaper men, Birmingham asleep in his chair and the two girls remained. Burrows grew restless, looked at his watch and guessed he'd go. Marguerite, learning the time, exclaimed, "Oh, damn! I have to be at my job at 9 A. M. I can't sleep till noon and later, like Helen. I'm a stenographer, not a lady of elegant leisure."

"Does the Village have taxis?" asked Peter.

"The Village," replied Marguerite, "has everything, my blue-eyed lad."

"Then I'll dig one up and we can drop you ladies at your doors," said Peter, who proceeded to carry out the plan. At parting they kissed all around, as a matter of course. That is, the two girls kissed the two young men. Not each other.

CHAPTER IV.

MARGUERITE HAS IDEAS AND PETER HAS A BIT OF TECHNIC.

IT was noon when Peter was awakened by the telephone. Helen was on the wire. She said she had a lovely idea for his play and wanted him to come right down to her so that she could tell him about it. Peter fenced a bit. He must rush to the office. He had that special story to write about the Community Players. Oh, yes, she would be in it, of course. The play would have to wait a bit. He had his living to earn. When could he call? It was hard to say. Yes, he had a day off a week. Thursday. Oh, very well; Thursday at 1 and she would have luncheon for him at her studio. The street door was always open; he should walk right in and up two flights.

"Persistent lady," thought Peter, and then the telephone bell rang again. Marguerite reported that she'd been trying for hours to get him, but the line was busy. How had he slept? When was she going to see him. His day off was Thursday? She would get away from the office early and expect him at her diggings at 5 sharp. Or he might drop down to her business address and take her to lunch. Oh—he had a lunch engagement. Well, 5 o'clock then.

The Sunday special story took quite a bit of writing and Peter was as nervous as a debutante. He had been on the Guardian only a year and this was his first signed

article. But it got itself done, somehow, and he turned it over to Brown, who tossed it into a drawer and announced that he would read it later. Peter returned to his routine leg-work. His day off came and at 1 o'clock he made his appearance at Helen's studio.

It was a shabby, happy-go-lucky square room. Why a studio Peter could not guess unless it was because a piece of crude batik was draped on one wall and a Japanese screen concealed a wash stand in a corner. A two-burner gas stove attached to a wall pipe proclaimed it to be a "housekeeping apartment." A dressmakers' folding table was set for two. The plates were of separate designs and one of the cups had no handle. When, later, Helen declared: "I am a Socialist," Peter mentally commented: "The place looks it."

But just now Helen was the intense, soul-searching hostess.

"God, how I have missed you!" she exclaimed as he entered. She might have been Lady Macbeth or Leah, the forsaken. "I don't suppose you have missed me?" she demanded, gazing searchingly into his mild blue eyes. Peter politely insisted that he had, but admitted having been very busy.

"It is the way with you men," she said bitterly. "Your lives are so full; but we women—ours are empty."

She showed her pink palms in a graceful gesture to prove her point and wondered what Peter was thinking.

"I wish she'd stop her damned acting," observed Peter's inner self.

There was a kiss, of course. Where Helen was concerned there was sure to be a kiss. For luncheon there were artichokes with Russian dressing, bottled beer decanted into the cups, a sausage which was new to him, sliced ham and rye bread. Helen had a samovar, all

ready to brew tea. Her appetite was excellent; indeed, she enjoyed eating so candidly that Peter was unconsciously repelled. She took large mouthfuls and her eyes had that soft, faraway look of a hungry dog with a bone. Daintiness was not one of her strong points, he thought.

After luncheon she bade him sit by her side on the couch, which looked exactly like what it was, a disguised bed. With her plump arm about his neck she then outlined to him her idea for his play. It was a neat and compact little thing for two characters, in which a Russian peasant man and wife discover that they are really brother and sister and get around it by taking poison. Peter feared that it was not quite in his line and she looked crushed. He suggested a stroll in the square and she asked reproachfully if he were not happy where he was and Peter replied, "oh, yes, quite," which was not wholly the truth. So there was another kiss.

A full hour before his next engagement he managed to escape, uneasy and a little alarmed. Helen explained that she was a child of nature with no artificial reticences. Peter pretended to be denser than he really was. Her plump charms and open challenge were most disturbing, but he was a cautious young man with a keen eye for possible consequences. He felt instinctively that Helen was not a garment to be put on and off and he had no intention of entangling himself. Peter, in short, was something of a puritan.

So he went away at 4 and Helen, after his departure, owned to herself that the day had been a complete failure. Still, she had the dumb patience of her race and its grim pertinacity.

He idled away his spare hour in Washington Square and then proceeded to Marguerite's address. He found her just returning from her duties of the day and they

entered together. She admitted him with her latchkey to a neat white hall and led him up the stairs to a room somewhat smaller than Helen's, but much tidier.

It was a white and green room, with cretonne curtains and enameled furniture. The inevitable gas plates were there and in front of one of the two windows stood a typewriter on a stand. The cot-bed was better disguised than in Helen's studio.

"Well?" queried Marguerite with a crooked, mischievous little smile, "and how did you leave our Fair Helen?"

Peter stared at her in astonishment.

"Of course, I knew you were lunching with her. This is your day off and your phone was busy for hours when I tried to get you the other day. No use trying to get ahead of Helen. She hasn't any job to rob her of her leisure, like I have, the lucky devil. She gets cheques from home and makes out by getting herself invited to dinner four or five times a week when her luck's good. But I won't be a cat and snitch on the poor thing. Say, though, you sure have captured her virgin heart."

Marguerite laughed with Southern heartiness.

"Fine combination you two would make; she with her burn-'em-alive temperament and you with your touch-me-not attitude!

"How about the play? Got any lay-out yet?" she asked, when they were at last seated. Peter found himself pouring out words with a readiness which would have astonished Helen. He told her what he had in mind and Marguerite immediately responded.

"Bully for us!" she cried. "It will knock their impressionistic eye out. It is one great little idea."

"I owe it to you," said Peter. "That Adam and Eve hint of yours was the start of it."

"Which part are you going to write for me?" she asked, elated. "Gosh! I can just see those free-love radical dames skipping about in white enameled bare legs and I'll be as bad as the worst of them. You have the right idea, Honey boy; girls love to strip and audiences love to have 'em. You're not nearly as green as you look."

Peter blushed. They discussed his germ of an idea and, behold, a plot unfolded itself, characters assumed form and in less than an hour the play was complete, all but the writing of it. She stirred his imagination without either of them knowing it, guiding his mind and providing the spur that quickened his ideas. It was a sort of collaboration.

A bright plan came to Marguerite.

"I suppose you're going to invite me out to dinner and to a show afterward," she said, and he admitted that some such notion had occurred to him. "But we won't go to the show afterward!" she crowed. "We'll have a nice, exclusive little show of our own. We'll come back here and I'll get out my notebook and you talk that play in the rough to me—dictate it—while I take it down. I'm going to be in on this whether you want me to or not."

"Delighted," said Peter, and meant it.

Marguerite told him about her own play, with its seven acts and fourteen scenes, and he smiled and elevated polite eyebrows as one who would remark: "Just like a woman." Seeing this, she added that while the form may have been impossible, the basic idea was good enough to draw paying crowds on Broadway, which information, of course, made Peter want to know all about it.

She told him of her home in Stillwater and of Aunt

Minerva and the successive jobs and, finally, of the perfidy of Regina De Leon, who returned the manuscript, but kept the corking good story it contained.

"But that," said Peter, scandalized, "was dishonorable."

"It was stealing candy from a baby," agreed Marguerite. "I couldn't do a thing about it either. I realize, now, that my play was absurd and impossible and all that, but just the same the *idea* was there."

"You are certainly facile with ideas," he murmured, recalling the ease with which she had tossed half a dozen perfectly feasible ones to him in the Dutchman's back room.

"I don't suppose I'll ever write a play myself," she mused. "I haven't the technic and what good are mere ideas without technic?"

He agreed that they were no good at all.

"And so," she concluded, "seeing that it was I who put you on the track, I'm going, as I said before, to be in on this whether you want me to or not."

"Delighted," said Peter again, and reverted to the Stillwater days.

"How long have you been in New York?" he asked, and Marguerite figured that it was a year and three days.

"I will have been here a year next Saturday!" he exclaimed. "By George, we are all but twins! I wonder if I have taken on as much of the New York air and manner as you, in that short little year?"

Marguerite looked at him with disarming ingenuousness.

"I mean," he explained, "did you say 'damn' and smoke cigarettes in Stillwater, Kentucky?"

"No," she admitted. "But, Peter, you doubtless said damn and smoked cigarettes in London, and yet if the

tarnish of New York clings to your skirts, I'm a deaf, dumb and blind nigger, not to mention a roaring, ring-tail rhinoceros and a few other things which I'm not."

"In other words," said Peter, sadly, "you detect a touch of something English in me?"

"Don't take it to heart," she replied. "You're not much more that way than a lord mayor's show, a beef-eater and the Albert Memorial rolled into one."

As a preliminary and to get the English stiffness out of him, as she explained, she guided him to a freak restaurant near the square. The dinner wasn't very good, she warned him, but the atmosphere of happy don't-give-a-damn was just what he needed. This was the second time she had used the word "damn." He didn't care for it, as coming from her. Her prediction as to the quality of the dinner was triumphantly justified. He found the soup to be greasy, the chicken embalmed and the potatoes squashy. The large basement needed dusting and the napeless tables needed paint, in which particular they were in vivid contrast to the dozen or so waitresses. These were care-free young women who smiled indulgently and impartially on the customers, agreed with them about the weather and exchanged quips and flattery at par. The one to whose mercies Peter and Marguerite were assigned was a bit careless with her cigarette ashes while she was carrying her tray, as witness his pat of butter, but Peter didn't care much about butter, so no real harm was done.

At a piano, tucked away in a corner, an indefatigable young man played by request and without notes any selection that occurred to the diners. When he struck up a popular song the latter joined in the chorus whether they knew it or not. The waitresses helped, too, and one of them later on deserted her customers to go up to the

piano, where she faced the assembly and sang in a voice of marked sweetness a ditty having to do with the shade of an old apple tree.

"Why don't you sing?" demanded Marguerite of Peter, but singing was not one of his accomplishments. Still, after his own fashion, he enjoyed the racket as one on the sidelines, and he quite glowed when they returned to Marguerite's green and white apartment. His tentative suggestion of a cocktail had been frowned on and certainly he had not eaten a great deal, so that no after-dinner lethargy hampered him. As he expressed it to Marguerite, he felt top hole. When he had explained what top hole was, she said she felt that way, too.

An exceedingly busy and pleasant evening followed and Peter made a discovery that had a tremendous effect on his later life. He found that he could dictate spontaneous and natural dialogue much more readily than he could write it. Indeed, his written speeches seemed stilted and "literary" in comparison. From the outset he was doomed to the services of a stenographer, but with Marguerite as the stenographer the doom did not appear to be very dreadful.

At 11 o'clock the job was finished. Marguerite promised to transcribe her notes the following evening and to mail the script to him. He wanted to call for it, but as she was in office all day and he was busy all night the prospects for frequent companionship looked dark. There remained only Thursday evenings.

"Aren't you going to kiss me good night?" he asked at the door.

"Turn me loose," said Marguerite in her best Kentucky manner, "I'm not Helen!"

She pushed him out into the night, but it was with a smile.

CHAPTER V.

THINGS BEGIN TO HAPPEN TO PETER.

THINGS began happening rapidly to Peter. The special story about the Community Players duly appeared, richly illustrated by Burrows, and not only made a hit in the office, but drew popular attention to the players and their campaign. Written in a vein of delicately bantering humor, the article reflected credit on the organization and sent a stream of seekers after novelty down to the queer little theater.

"Didn't I tell you?" almost shrieked Mr. Levanski on the Monday evening following the Sunday publication. "Didn't I tell you how it would be if we jollied that newspaper feller right? And now look at! Thousands of dollars wouldn't have bought what we got free of all charge. I bet you the Shuberts and Al Woods and even Dave Belasco himself would be going down on their knees for publicity like that! All for a free lunch and a little jollying. We should produce his little play no matter how rotten it would be."

Instead of performances three evenings a week the players soon obliged nightly and to audiences that returned a profit. Birmingham, who was inclined to claim credit for the "boosting" spirit of the article, demanded and reluctantly won a slight increase of salary. Copies of the Sunday special littered up both dressing rooms.

"Did you see what he said about me?" asked Helen, with a significant and soulful sigh which announced as

plainly as a sigh could that the tribute had been dictated by the personal feelings of the author.

"Keep your hair on, dearie," retorted Marguerite. "He mentioned me first and it wasn't alphabetical, either. The H's come ahead of the M's. And if you'll take the trouble to count the words, you'll find that Miss Taylor got eight more than Miss Robbins."

"He played fair with the whole of us," said Isabel Rubinstein, "only you and Helen have better parts than the rest. I don't see any occasion for anybody to pin medals on for being an odds-on favorite with the author."

The impartial Peter, promoted to be second assistant Sunday editor as a reward of merit, felt that he was indeed blessed beyond his deserts. His weekly envelope was heavier and his labors were correspondingly lighter. He now had occasional evenings to himself and his play, fresh from the typewriter of Marguerite, read better than he had hoped. It was a mildly satirical comedy of prehistoric times, purporting to show that human nature was much the same in 25,000 B. C. as in 1913 A. D. The characters entered from caves, fur-clad and armed with stone weapons, and the contrast between their physical appearance and the sentiments they uttered in cultured English was what Peter intended for the high point.

He read his script to the assembled committee on plays, which included Birmingham and Crane, and the impression created by the reading was profound.

"Say," declared Birmingham in an awed voice, "perhaps I don't know much about this business and lots of people think I don't, but something tells me this lil' play is going to be a wow. Nothing less than a wow. If it isn't, then I'll eat Crane's hat."

Crane was less enthusiastic.

"Bright idea," he conceded, grudgingly, "but the damn

thing is done on conventional lines. What he's done is to sugar a pill. It's the prehistoric setting that makes it go down. Otherwise it is the same old stuff. False pretences, I call it."

The committee did not trouble to put the matter to a vote. Birmingham had already cast the piece in his mind as the reading progressed. A call was issued for Sunday morning for an author's reading and first rehearsal. Three women and four men comprised the cast and before the Sunday morning reading Birmingham distributed the part books. Marguerite's part was that of an ugly duckling, whose dainty features did not in the least conform with the prevailing husky type of the cave-dwellers and who was consequently scorned. Isabel Rubinstein was her younger sister, the pet of the family and admired for her sturdiness of limb. Helen's part was that of the mother of the two girls. Helen assumed dizzy heights of indignation.

"I will NOT play a Mother Part!" she declared, hotly. "What do you think I am?"

"All right," agreed Birmingham, jovially, "you're out."

"Peter!" wailed Helen, with an air of possession, "are you going to let 'em do this to me?"

"Peter's got no say in the matter," interrupted the stage director, "and if you'll listen to me a minute, darling, you'll stick around and hear what it's all about before you go throwing down the punch part of the piece."

The reading developed that the Mother part had one scene of tempestuous emotion where she mourned her first-born as dead. It was the only sympathetic touch in the play. The characters were otherwise selfish and unlovable. Helen had stage sense enough to realize that this scene would center everything on her for the

time being. Still she would not surrender too easily. She again appealed to Peter, once more creating that effect of possesion which made Birmingham ask himself: "What's this, anyway? A sketch?"

"Peter," asked Helen, a yearning note in her fine voice, "do you *want* me to play that part?"

"You'd do it beautifully, I'm sure," he replied cautiously.

"Very well, Dear," sighed Helen, "for your sake I'll play it." Her air of sweet resignation was beautiful.

"Fine!" boomed Birmingham, taking a position down by the footlights and addressing the little company assembled up-stage. "Now, children, listen to Papa for a minute."

The "children" dutifully prepared to obey.

"This piece we've just heard has got guts in it, which makes it different from most of the stuff we've been bunking the dear customers with. But you don't need to know that. Of course, you're all high-brow improvers of the Drama and the only real sensible idea you ever had was to hire a low-brow roughneck like me to guide your tiny footsteps. Now you know and I know that your heads are up in the clouds, which is all right as long as I keep your feet on the ground. And that's what I'm going to do. I've done it before and I'll do it this time. Thank Gawd I got something here to do it with and won't have to invent meanings for blah-blah stuff. So go through this script like you didn't know it was sarcastic or funny or satirical, but just ordinary, every-day conversation. Get me?

"The cave R. C. will be up there. Now then, Moe, you are discovered in front of the cave cracking a marrow bone with a stone hammer, and you, Helen, come on from the cave instead of being discovered like you are

in the script. I'm fixing an entrance for you, Pet, and I guess Peter won't mind the liberty . . ."

The rehearsal was on. The players went through their lines and business with surprisingly few interruptions from Mr. Birmingham. Three times this happened and Peter began to fear that the stage director was showing less interest than was to be expected from his preliminary enthusiasm. It appeared, however, that he was biding his time. After the third repetition he came to life with a snap.

"Now you've all had your way," he said, pleasantly, "and some of you were pretty rotten and some of you were worse. Time to get down to brass tacks, and for the love of Mike, you smart amateurs, stop pushing one another for the dead center of the stage! There's plenty of other places to speak lines from. A real actor doesn't need to hog position. Bring an honest-to-gawd actor down here and he could stand way up left with his back to the house and steal the whole damn show from you. Let's start again and start right."

They were still hard at it when Peter stole away, a strange elation amounting almost to intoxication thrilling his senses. He had heard his lines spoken and seen his business performed. He, Peter Millard, had written down thoughts which would be audibly conveyed by collaborating players in characters created by him to, well, perhaps thousands of people. It was a pleasant sensation.

"Very Much B. C.," as he called his playlet, was to be one of three pieces to form the forthcoming bill and a week before the opening the Community Players went through the trio in regular order, with props, but without scenery and costumes. Peter had had a glimpse of the scene model which Burrows had designed for his piece

and heartily approved it as being decorative and modest, calculated to complement the play itself without distracting attention from it.

Helen, as a reward for humbling herself to a "mother part," had been cast in another of the little plays and Peter recognized it as her own brother-and-sister idea embellished by Crane under the non-committal title of "What Is Morality?" Her lines were highfalutin and the situation where she discovered that her husband was also her brother, was stark and ugly, but she gave an hysterical swing to the thing which lifted it out of absurdity. Mr. Crane was loftily superior to such childish details as explanations. What he sought was Effects and never mind Causes. Not knowing clearly what he meant, himself, he achieved a convincing atmosphere of mystic symbolism which the audience was free to interpret as it chose.

During the rehearsal of this tid-bit Birmingham, who was seated next to Peter in the first row, whispered:

"They'll either laugh their heads off at this or it will give 'em the creeps. Helen's going to save it, I think. Queer dame, that. No education, no brains, no ordinary intelligence, but Gawd, how she can act! Yes, sir; she's likely to make 'em swallow this high-art gesture thing. We don't even know what kind of poison it is that makes 'em flop around, but lets 'em spout long speeches between flops. I asked Crane and he said he was a dramatist, not a chemist. But, say, Boy, this makes it soft for *your* lil' play! Some day, I suppose, you'll buckle down and write a real show for Broadway."

When the curtains had shut off the two supposed corpses from public view, Peter congratulated Crane on his little tragedy and Crane, with a mildly sneering smile, replied:

"You don't mean it, of course, but neither do I when I tell you 'Very Much B. C.' is corking. So we are quits."

After the rehearsal of his own piece, the last one on the bill, Peter was called into consultation over the costumes.

Isabelle Rubinstein acted as ringleader.

"It'll be all right if we wear—now—tights, with furs over them?" she asked, while her sister players betrayed eager interest.

"I can't conscientiously ask you ladies to do anything you wouldn't approve of," replied the author, guardedly, "but tights will give the effect of stocking-feet unless you also wear moccasins, or something of that sort."

"Do you want us to play in bare legs?" demanded Isabel, a hostile glitter in her eyes.

"They do it at the Winter Garden with less excuse," murmured Peter, "but, as I said, it is up to you ladies to do as you feel about it. Just one thing: By all means let us have modesty. Cave women wrapped themselves up from neck to feet, for all we know to the contrary."

This edict rather dismayed the young women. Peter was meeting them at their own game with a vengeance. Covering themselves from neck to feet was not at all their idea of it. Marguerite was the first to recover.

"Oh, well," she conceded, "I haven't any corns to attract the eye and the stage is plenty warm. Of course, if there are any bunions in the cast I'll do as the others do, but personally, being that it's for Art's sake, I vote nix tights."

It appeared that there were no bunions in the cast, and it being, as Marguerite had pointed out, for Art's sake, the other two reluctantly agreed with Marguerite. Isabel had registered her protest, which had been duly recorded,

so her conscience was clear. Helen shrugged her plump shoulders, murmured that she had nothing to be ashamed of and favored Peter with a confidential and melting look.

This was Tuesday. The opening was to be the following Monday and a dress rehearsal was called for Sunday evening. On Saturday, Peter returning home from work shortly after midnight, found a huddled figure in the vestibule of his apartment house.

The figure looked up tragically. It was Helen Robbins.

Peter was astonished. Helen's face was wet with tears and she was the embodiment of hopeless woe. He bore a hand and lifted her to her feet, noting dimly that she was inclined to be heavy.

"What in the world——" began Peter and Helen flopped on him with a new burst of weeping.

"I have no place to go! I've been put out of my room and there's a padlock on my door," she wailed. "So I have come to you. Take me in."

"Hush!" he whispered nervously. Her voice was raised and he was fearful of a scandal. He fumbled with his key.

"Come in *quietly*," he said brusquely, and led the way to his two rooms on the street floor. There he switched on the electric lights and standing with coat and hat still on, gravely faced her. She quailed before his look, but she need not have quailed quite so much. It was merely Peter being virtuous in his British way, but being virtuous in a British way seems rather formidable to those who are not British.

Peter's two-room apartment faced the street. The rear door of his bedroom was permanently locked against a similar apartment in the rear. There was an entrance

hall between him and the rooms across the way. He carefully closed the sliding doors between his front and his bedroom. Ordinary sounds thus being cut off, he said to Helen, who had sunk miserably on to an upholstered couch, her hat awry and her coat muffling her:

"Now tell me all about it—and for goodness sake speak low."

"You hate me!" sobbed Helen, burying her face in a sofa pillow.

"Now—now—now—" said Peter, soothingly, "you know I don't."

"Yes, you do!"

"Tell me the trouble."

"I owed two weeks and my cheque didn't come and when I went home after rehearsal tonight, they'd put a padlock on my door. I wish I was dead!"

"Please—my dear child! Stop crying," demanded Peter. "I can't understand more than one word in six. Your diction is terrible."

His untimely and unjust criticism produced another fit of sobbing. Peter removed his coat and hat, which he flung down on a chair, sat him down on another chair at the side of the couch, took Helen's cold hand and let her weep. Finally she sat up, keeping tight hold of his hand.

"Peter," she said, "do you love me?"

"Of course I—I'm very fond of you—oh, yes, indeed," he sputtered, turning red. What else could he say, under the circumstances?

"Then you won't send me away?"

"Wait a bit," said Peter. "This is a—well, it's a respectable house, you know." It was an unfortunate remark and she stiffened with resentment.

"What I mean to say," he floundered on, "is that—

well, it's a respectable house and *we* are respectable, of course, and so—well, in short, there you are."

"I am a good girl," announced Helen, not boastfully, but as a simple statement of fact.

"Of *course* you are! That's what I was saying. It's a respectable house and we are respectable and you are a good girl and so this is the devil of a mess, isn't it?"

"I've no other place to go," whimpered Helen. "It's the middle of the night and I havent any other friends and I am in your play and you say you love me"—like a coward he let that pass—"and what was I to do?"

"You did quite right, oh, yes, indeed!" agreed Peter, cheerfully. "And now, let's see: I can pack a small bag and run down to the Endicott and——"

"No!" objected Helen.

"But, my dear girl! We must do *something*. If you prefer, I'll loan you some money and you can go to an hotel——"

"I'd die if I was left alone!" she wailed. "I know I would! I'm half crazy as it is; can't you see I am? If I'm left alone I'll kill myself! I swear I will!"

"If she kills herself," thought Peter, "zip goes the first night of my play!" Aloud he said, soothingly:

"Oh, no, you wouldn't."

"I will!" she insisted, "if you leave me or send me away. How can you be so mean? Oh, you English!"

"I'm not English—I'm American," retorted Peter, as was his habit when thus accused. "But, don't you see? You'll be compromised. I'll be compromised——"

"Men can't be compromised!"

"But you will be! Regularly ruined and so forth, you know."

"Who's going to blab?" she demanded. "I'm not. Nobody saw me come in. If you throw me out you're

a dirty beast and if you run away and leave me you'll come back to find me dead!"

Again the fate of his play flashed into his mind. He grew suddenly severe.

"Very well," he announced. "You are welcome to my bedroom. I suggest that you lock the door, for the sake of appearances. You'll be quite safe."

Helen looked dismayed.

"But what will you do?" she asked.

"I? Oh, I have a book to review. I often sit up reading till daylight. Small hours and so forth. Best time for serious reading. No distracting sounds. Good night."

Helen retired with a sullen "good night." He slid the doors together after her. Then he wound his watch, yawned, and sat down to his book. After an interval the glass panels in the folding doors showed dark.

"Good night!" piped Helen again.

"S-h-h-h," warned Peter.

He read for an hour.

Helen lay wide awake in the dark, thinking bitter thoughts and telling herself that she did not intend to sleep a wink. But she was a comfort-loving creature and the bed was comfortable. She found herself struggling against the temptation to sleep and struggling against temptation was not one of Helen's gifts.

Peter read for an hour. Then he lifted his head and listened, alarmed. There most certainly was a sound. Gradually he identified it. Helen had a fully developed and capable nose and from it there issued a well-developed and capable snore. He grinned with relief, carefully arose, got into his hat and overcoat and, leaving the lights full on, tiptoed into the hall and out of the house.

CHAPTER VI.

PETER FEELS LIKE A RUINED GENTLEMAN, BUT HE IS NOT.

FROM his hotel room at 9 o'clock that morning, Peter telephoned to his abandoned apartment. He felt uneasy, for Helen had been dramatically convincing when she declared her intention of making away with herself. His telephone had an extension at the side of his bed at home. He waited with growing trepidation for what appeared to be a long time.

Helen was awakened by the ringing of the bell. She slipped out of bed and stepped to the closed folding doors.

"Peter," she said, calling through the doors, "the phone is ringing!" No answer. Probably he was asleep. She pushed the doors apart a few inches. The lights in the front room were in full blast, but the room was vacant. She gave an exclamation and marched to the telephone.

Peter's anxious voice hoped that she had slept well. Where was he? Oh, at the Endicott. She had better take a taxi down and join him for breakfast. They could then arrange the little matter of the delinquency in rent. Too bad she hadn't slept; strain and worry and everying, of course—very well. He would expect her in half an hour. Hello—hello—there were clean towels in the second drawer of the chiffonier.

At breakfast Helen was demure and sweet and forgiving. She spoke with drooping eyes of her behavior of

the night before. She would never forget his kindness and his chivalry. She would never, *never* forget that he had told her he loved her!

Peter choked on his bit of toast, or perhaps it was his rasher of bacon. By the time he had recovered it was too late to protest. A correction of that sort must immediately follow the misapprehension, or it was anti-climatic. The best he could do was to murmur that they were both, no doubt, much overwrought. Helen could not very well follow up the advantage, since they were in a public dining room, but she gazed at him with a sweet smile of surrender, which led an adjacent gentleman from South America to regard them with sentimental interest as a couple on their honeymoon.

Peter had prepared a little wad, composed of two twenty-dollar bills, and these he palmed and pressed into her hand when they parted in the hotel lobby. She felt the wad and immediately identified it.

"I can never repay you," she murmured in her best society manner, and as time went on he realized that she had meant it literally. At any rate, she never did repay him.

The Community Playhouse boasted two dressing rooms, one for each sex. In the women's room that evening Helen created positive awe as she prepared herself for the dress rehearsal as the Russian peasant who had made a miscalculation in choosing a husband. She was as volatile and gay as a French girl who has been drinking champagne and, indeed, one of the girls went so far as to hint that cocktails might explain her unusual behavior. Instead of flaring up, Helen laughed.

"When you are loved as I am loved," she exulted, "you will understand." This had the desired effect of exciting interest. Questions were asked and Helen's mod-

est reluctance, which did not, however, quite save her from making compromising replies, was most convincing. Marguerite, applying cupid's bows to her upper lip, heard with ill-concealed dismay where Helen had spent the night. She stared grimly at her reflection in her square of looking glass.

"So, *that's* where she was!" she thought. It happened that Marguerite, after rehearsal the night before, chanced to think of a costume detail and turned to Helen's studio for a highly necessary consultation on the subject. She waited in the studio until 2 o'clock and then went home, vaguely alarmed, not for Helen's safety, but by unpleasant intuitions which persisted in forcing themselves on her mind. And now her suspicions had been confirmed by Helen herself. Marguerite hated Peter. She hated Helen. She hated herself for caring. She felt bitter and jealous and while hating Peter she absolved him of blame. He was nothing but a man.

By the time the dress rehearsal began Helen's coy confession had become common property. Everybody had heard of it except Peter. Her performance in the morbid, degenerate trifle with which the performance began was a revelation even to Birmingham, who sat with Peter in the first row. She was pliable, sensitive, keenly poised and in her big scene she was overwhelming. The fairly capable young man who played opposite her was openly bewildered by the force and sweep of her acting.

Birmingham shot an accusing leer at the innocent Peter.

"I got to hand it to you, Kid," he grinned. "You sure woke her up. If Belasco ever catches that dame's work, there'll be one swell actorine missing out of the Village."

As the curtain closed on "What is Morality?" some

of the lady ushers were observed to glance at Peter with new interest.

"What do you know about that!" exclaimed the girl who took tickets at the door. "If that's what true love will do, I'm going to pick me out a nice big sweetie and be a grand actress!"

The audience was composed of players in the other two pieces, made-up and ready (but trespassing in front for this occasion only); the lady ushers, Mr. Levanski, and a few favored friends of the Community movement. They applauded until their palms stung. Helen's triumph was unalloyed.

There ensued the usual unaccountably long delay between acts characteristic of dress rehearsals. Helen hurried into her cave woman furs, popped into slippers, threw a bathrobe over her fur costume and came out front to catch the second play. She claimed as her right a seat next to Peter and took open possession of his hand, much to his annoyance. There she sat through the performance of the little piece while Peter, squirmed, ill-at-ease where all might see, and seeing, snicker.

The second piece ended to mild applause. It was a bright bit of writing in which a Greenwich Village couple, defying convention by omitting the marriage ceremony, found themselves seriously regarded by all their friends as respectably mated, much to their dismay. Helen behaved exactly as if the piece pointed straight at Peter and herself and her confusion was regarded with sympathetic interest. Peter saw that something was in the air, but no one enlightened him.

After a long wait came "Very Much B. C."

When the curtains parted and Moe Bernstein was discovered under a matted wig, wearing scraggly whiskers and a fur apron, there was a little gasp of surprise. But

when, a moment later, Helen entered, attired in not nearly enough fur to properly bless herself with and her ample charms covered mostly by grease paint, the gasp developed into an explosion. Peter was shocked. It was nothing short of scandalous. Soon Marguerite tripped on, and she was no more clad than Helen; rather less, if anything. She made a distractingly appealing figure with her slender limbs whitened almost to marble and her glorious hair tumbling about her shoulders. A moment later Isabel Rubinstein completed the picture and Isabel was seen to have been even more daring than her sister artists.

"How's that for ten cents worth of fur at a dollar a yard?" whispered Birmingham into Peter's ear. "Ain't women the limit! Once they start to take off things they never know where to stop. And Isabel's the shrinkin' violet who wanted tights!"

"This can't be permitted, you know!" choked Peter. "It's outrageous. Why—the police——"

"Leave it to me," consoled Birmingham. "That's what a dress rehearsal is for. It'll be all right to-morrow night, but I'll say this: To-night's bunch is certainly getting an eye-full."

The men in the cast were comparatively conservative in their ideas of cave-period costumes, but for the preliminary audience the damage had been done. Nudity shrieked from the stage and drowned out the milder notes of the piece itself. It mattered nothing what was said or how, it was the spectacle that captured the audience and when the curtains closed Peter had a gone sensation in the pit of his stomach. His play was a flop. Not a line got over effectively, not a situation won recognition; he had miserably failed.

Something of what was going on in his mind appeared

to communicate itself to Birmingham, who slapped him encouragingly on the back.

"She's a winner!" he cried. "Don't you worry, Son; they'll eat it up as soon as those dames stop setting up unfair competition with their pleasing lil' persons. Listen to me tell 'em a few things."

He jumped to the low stage, over the footlights in front of the drawn draperies and addressed the chattering crowd.

"At-ten-shun!" he shouted, clapping his hands, and got it. "Ladies and gentlemen: This concludes our entertainment and you will please pass out through the nearest exit. We poor drudges have some particular business to attend to and everybody but the cast and authors is excused."

The hall gradually emptied. Birmingham ordered the curtains to be drawn back and hopped down into the auditorium. Standing on a chair in the first row he shouted for everybody "on," stage hands and all. When they had gathered he launched into a crisp and undiluted critcism of everything that had gone wrong. Consulting a sheaf of notes, he scolded the curtain man, the electrician, the prompter and the carpenter, laying the blame on a bit thick, Peter thought. Then he reached the players and finally came to "Very Much B. C." He found fault with the moonrise, with back-stage noises, with the makeup of one of the men and last of all he opened up on the ladies of the cast.

"I don't know what you think you are in this show," he grinned, "but either you are tryin' to make Ziggy jealous, or you're figurin' on bein' raided by the cops. Honest, girlies, if Al Woods had been here to-night he would have fainted dead away at the sight of you. I was in Goldfield during the rush but I never saw anything in

the honky-tonks that could touch what my startled eyes have beheld this evening, and that goes for all three of you. Of course you didn't know how it was goin' to look from the front, but you do, now. You and I will hie ourselves to the costumer's to-morrow morning and we'll rewrite those furs so's we can give a show without police interference. You certainly fixed it fine for the blushin' author! There ain't any lines in the world that could stand up against what you did to him. I guess that'll be about all. Ten o'clock to-morrow morning at Goldberg's place. No—wait a minute. I just want to say this to all of you:

"They say a bad dress rehearsal means a good first night and vice-versa. Outside the few lil' things I mentioned this was one damn good rehearsal. So take my tip and don't run away with the idea that you are all there; all to the gravy. You ain't. Lil' old self-confidence'll get you if you don't watch out. Not one of you is so good that you couldn't be better. That's all."

The crowd on the stage shuffled off to dressing rooms. Birmingham suggested to Peter that a lil' drink wouldn't go so bad if they could find a place open, but Peter did not rise to the suggestion. He felt depressed over what he feared was his flat failure. He needed encouragement other than Birmingham's. In this connection Marguerite occurred to him. He decided to wait and say good night to her. So declining Birmingham's invitation to join him in a lil' snifter, he hunched himself in a chair and Birmingham went off by himself.

Players, restored to work-a-day mien, filtered through the side door from the stage and passed out through the auditorium with cheery "good nights." Marguerite appeared and would have passed him with a curt nod, but he arose and stopped her.

"I want to thank you for your delightful interpretation of my poor little piece," he said, timidly, holding out his hand.

"Oh, that's all right," she replied, giving him a friendly grip, but looking curiously into his eyes. "Were we as indecent as Birmy said?"

"Well," hesitated Peter, "you were—ah—sensational. Really, my dear girl, I don't quite see how you brought yourselves to it."

"Oh, I suppose it was a cattish little streak that put it into each of our heads to go a little bit further than the other two to capture attention; but honest, Peter, I didn't think it was going to look so terrible and I intended to play fair. Why, I waited up for Helen in her room until 2 o'clock this morning to make an agreement with her——"

"In Helen's room? THIS morning?"

"Why, yes. Why not?"

She looked her astonishment at his incredulity.

So Helen had deliberately lied to him. She had made it all up and had thrown herself at him with malice aforethought. Well, she had been jolly well served for her deceit and he had been deuced lucky in his escape from her shameful plot.

"You don't look very happy," said Marguerite.

"In a funk about the play, I suppose. It didn't seem to get over, somehow, although *you* did beautifully. Afraid I haven't hit it."

Marguerite's searching look became quizzical.

"I know you so well," she smiled. "I've worked with you and sized you up and you're as clear as plate glass to me. How did she manage it? You're such a helpless innocent, and you don't like it a bit, do you, dear? It's a sin and a shame to take advantage of you."

"I beg your pardon," said Peter, stiffly. "I'm afraid I don't quite catch your drift."

"About Helen——"

She moved toward the lobby; he kept pace with her.

"Nothing you have said applies in the remotest degree to Helen and myself," he said, crisply.

Marguerite shrugged her graceful shoulders.

"Have it your way," she retorted. "No—I don't want you to see me home. Better wait for *her*, hadn't you? And really, dear boy, you two ought to agree on the stories you give out for publication. Good night."

On her way through the narrow street she thought:

"He lied like a perfect gentleman and that's exactly what he is, poor dear."

Peter had got a cigarette drawing and turned up his coat collar before venturing into the night. Helen hurried to him, beaming, but a glance at his face startled her.

"What's the matter, Darling?" she asked, frightened.

"I have just been having a chat with Miss Taylor," he replied in a chilling voice. "She was telling me that she waited up for you in your room until 2 o'clock this morning. She didn't mention a padlock, or anything."

"She's a dirty liar!" exclaimed Helen, in a panic.

"There has certainly been a bit of lying somewhere," he retorted, politely lifting his hat. He departed, leaving her open-mouthed and dismayed, but not for long.

"What do I care!" thought Helen. "I'm glad he found out. It'll show him how far I'd go for him and after what I said in the dressing room, I guess I have him cinched. He might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb."

CHAPTER VII

PETER EXPERIENCES STAGE FRIGHT AND IS SAVED ONLY BY PUBLICLY BEING KISSED. MARGUERITE DECLARES WAR

THERE were regular critics out in front on the occasion of the Community Players' new bill. It happened that Broadway offered no competition in the way of theatrical novelty on this particular Monday evening and the Village Bunch had created enough town-talk since their discovery by the Guardian to make them figure as news. Several limousines drove up and discharged well-dressed occupants and Mr. Levanski, with evidences of a bath and a shave in honor of the occasion, felt that the world had not been created in vain.

Birmingham, as one on whose shoulders rested the responsibilities of the universe, appeared early and noticeably drunk. He was a nuisance back-stage and was amiably throwing the over-wrought players into a panic of nerves when Peter diplomatically tempted him over to the Dutchman's where, with Machiavellian subtlety he plied him with highballs until he was helpless.

Leaving him in the back room in a comfortable stupor, with instructions that he be kept that way at his expense, Peter hurried back to the little theater which he found crowded to capacity. He stood among the ushers back of the last row of seats and saw Helen score a veritable triumph in "What is Morality?" Tremendous applause followed the curtain and she and her fellow-player were called and re-called a dozen times, the audience refusing

to be satisfied until she made her appearance alone to receive the concentrated demonstration on her heaving shoulders.

Peter saw her scanning the audience surreptitiously, as if searching for some particular face. He felt in his bones that he was expected to go back stage and congratulate her. She was waiting for him at the dressing room door.

"You were wonderful," said Peter, truthfully and she promptly kissed him.

"Just wait!" she cooed. "I'll get' em again in that big scene of yours, only in a different way. I chewed up the scenery in this, but in your play I'll paralyze 'em without raising a finger! Oh, you darling—just wait!"

She hugged him to her ample bosom and Marguerite, poking her head out of the dressing room, murmured, "Oh, excuse me," and hastily withdrew.

He remained back stage during the presentation of the second piece, catching it from the first entrance. It went fairly well. The sophisticated audience missed none of the clever little points and laughed politely where they were expected to. It was, however, rather an anti-climax after Helen's tremendous work which had preceded it. The piece should have been done first to get full value. Birmingham had slipped a cog, Peter reflected. Then he saw that his own play would profit by the arrangement and was selfish enough to be glad of it.

Marguerite had not boasted in vain when she promised that they would get it "over." The striking novelty of the prehistoric setting made a definite appeal. The revision of the women's costumes had been drastic, but there still remained an effect of piquancy. While there was nothing over which to be shocked, there was a pleasant thrill in the successive appearance of the three girls. The set lighted well and the moonrise behaved itself.

During the early part of the performance Marguerite, by reason of her fetching appearance and really delicate work seemed to be running away with the honors, but Helen stopped all that when her scene of mourning over the supposed death of her first-born was reached. Here she presented a picture of an inarticulate and stricken mother that caused Peter to marvel. The scene immediately followed a laugh and the abrupt transition was expertly managed. There was only a minute or two of it, but Helen held them hypnotized from the moment of her heart-rending wail until the unexpected appearance of the supposed departed turned the whole thing back into comedy again. It "stopped the show," as it is technically called, for the interrupting crack of applause left Marguerite with her next line suspended and Helen had to step out of the picture to acknowledge the tribute and restore quiet.

"Very Much B. C." swung on to a highly successful conclusion. The bill ran a little short of the conventional time, for it was not yet 11. The audience was, therefore, in no hurry, but stood and applauded insistently. From the rear of the auditorium came the high voice of Mr. Levanski.

"Author! Author!" it wailed. The cry was taken up. The good-natured audience, having had the notion put into its collective head, was curious to see what manner of man had written this refreshing bit of nonsense. Two excited lady ushers grabbed Peter by the arms where he stood at the rear of the house and rushed him down a side aisle to the door leading back stage. Out of his panic and bewilderment emerged the cloudy impression that the lady ushers did not smell sweet. Then he found himself pushed out on the stage, blinking at the glaring footlights.

"Spe-e-ch! Spe-e-ch!" wailed the Levanski treble and

the audience dutifully echoed the demand. Peter felt like an empty hot water bottle. There was nothing between his spine and his abdomen. He seemed not to be breathing. Stage fright had him in its grip and he turned blindly to flee; but Helen was on one side of him and Marguerite on the other, while Isabel hovered about. He was a prisoner, indeed, for now Helen seized one of his hands and Marguerite already held the other.

"Spee-e-ech!" insisted the laughing audience, enjoying the barbaric spectacle of a frightened full-grown man. Peter could not have told his name. His face bore the expression of a large, red fish out of water. Then Marguerite created a diversion by reaching up on her tip-toes and implanting a chaste kiss on his cheek. In an instant Helen had followed her example on the other side, and Isabel, maneuvering for position, pushed Marguerite out of the way and made it unanimous. The audience roared.

At this point some one with a sense of showmanship had the presence of mind to draw the curtains on the affecting little scene.

The net result of the new bill's success and the critical attention it received was a further increase in the prosperity of the Community Players and a development of temperament among some of its members. But Marguerite lost her position in the exporting house because of her truancy on that Monday morning when she had to visit the costumer's for revision. Her share of the takings more than made up the lost salary, but she nevertheless set about looking for another place. Her energetic nature would not permit her to idle away her time all day in contentment. A new position, however, eluded her and she grew restless.

Peter, too was uneasy. He could not help noticing the sly smiles projected in his direction by the people at

the Community Playhouse and they stung him. It seemed to be definitely accepted that Helen was his "sweetie," as the saying went. Rotten, vulgar word, "sweetie," and totally inapropo. He was nothing of the sort, but what the deuce was a chap to do under the awkward circumstances? He couldn't very well go about declaring in the face of the lady's behavior that he was free, heart-whole and unattached. She was a marvelous actress and she had pointed up "Very Much B. C." beyond his highest hopes, but he wished she wouldn't act as if she owned him. Compromising herself without the least compunction. Indecent, he called it. Particularly he dreaded Marguerite's piquant, accusing smile.

In self-defense Peter kept away from the theater, although his inclinations drew him toward it every free evening. It was hard not to bask in the approving applause of appreciative audiences. He tried coming in late and sneaking into the darkened auditorium just as his piece went on, but always some solicitous lady usher discovered him and got word back stage that he was in front. It wasn't sporting for him to go away without saying hello to the good people who were doing so much for him.

Birmingham, with a genuine "wow" on his hands, playing to important receipts and recognized as one of New York's regular attractions with ads in the papers and everything, became suddenly business-like and correspondingly sober. Time had been not so long ago when, if a player were indisposed, the performance was merely omitted and the handful of local people in the house were dismissed with a brief apology and asked to come again. But the Playhouse was now a "regular theayter," as Levanski called it. There were understudy rehearsals, held between five and seven o'clock, after the

day's employment, a call-board was put up for possible future bulletins and a stage letter-box was installed. The public was taking a personal interest and the players were getting the same sort of mail that Broadway show-folks might expect, from impressionable gushers.

At an understudy rehearsal of "Very Much B. C." which required Peter's presence to pass on the qualifications of the substitutes, he encountered Marguerite who had dropped in out of a pardonable curiosity to see how the other girl looked in her part.

"Hello, stranger," she hailed him. "You don't know any nice, promising author man who wants a secretary to help him write his next play, do you? Or are they going to rest on their laurels and call it a day? I'm still out of luck. Big business houses seem to think it's undignified for their stenographers to spend their evenings kicking about in bare legs and a piece of fur. If I don't find something to do day-times I'm going to get into mischief!"

Now Peter had again felt the stirring of creation in him and her reminder brought it to a focus. He *did* want to write another piece, by Jove, but simply hadn't got down to it. And he couldn't afford the luxury of a personal secretary, without which he felt that he was helpless. Dictating his dialogue was obviously the only method for him.

"Won't the Guardian allow you a stenog of your own?" asked Marguerite, candidly. "I'll work for twenty-five a week on an eight hour basis and when you've nothing else to do you might talk scenes to me for that next play of yours."

"It wouldn't be quite honorable, do you think?" asked Peter to whom honor was dear.

"Oh, Gosh! What's the difference? The Guardian

people aren't paying you what you're worth, are they? They're getting you as cheap as they can. I noticed they printed your B.C. show in the Sunday magazine the other day. Pay you extra for it? I thought not—the cheap skates. Well, write 'em another one on the same terms, but make 'em stand the expense of writing it. If you use their paper and their typewriter, why can't you use their stenographer?"

Peter was half converted. He ventured to speak to Brown, the Sunday editor, about it and Brown, figuring absently on how to work in a stenographer and not exceed his appropriation, saw a way and told him to go ahead. Marguerite made her demure debut on the twenty-seventh floor of the Guardian building the following Monday and immediately proceeded to prove her value. It was quite jolly for all of them.

Bright and early one morning Peter received a peremptory telephone summons from Helen. She was quite vicious about it. She demanded that he make his immediate appearance at her studio on a matter of vital importance. Never mind what it was; he'd find out when he came, but if he wanted his old show to keep on its untroubled career, he'd better come up. Vaguely alarmed, Peter promised to drop in on his way to the office.

He found Helen in a towering and emotional passion.

"So!" she proclaimed, "you got that cat on your staff at last, have you? And after what you said to me, that time! You thought you could keep it from me, did you? And maybe you think I'm going to stand for it like a ninny. Well, if you do, you're skidding. Either you kick her out right now, or I quit cold at the show shop."

"Wh-what are you talking about?" stammered Peter, overwhelmed.

"I'm talking about Marguerite and the job you got her

where you can have her in your private office. She let it slip out last night in the dressing room. Slip out! she crowed over it! And I can just see you and her locked in a nice, private office all day! I won't stand for it! I'll quit the show cold!"

Peter took a firm grip on himself, froze beautifully and entered the fray:

"As to your quitting cold, it's quite your own business, Old Thing. If you want to leave the Players flat, in that dishonorable manner, I don't know what is to stop you. But I must beg of you to get this: The Morning Guardian doesn't care for your advice in the matter of employing people and you'd better keep your pretty little finger out of its affairs."

"There won't be any show to-night!"

"Oh, yes there will."

"They haven't understudied me! I'm so healthy and regular and I mean so much to the show that——"

"Nevertheless, there will be a performance, as usual. Good morning."

"Peter!" she wailed over the banisters, "you told me you loved me!"

Peter, hearing, shuddered, but did not reply. Helen, returning to her studio, smashed a few of the less-essential things in it. Anyway, they belonged to the landlady.

As soon as he reached his office he telephoned to the Playhouse and imparted the sad news, begging the box-office girl to get into touch with Mr. Birmingham. Then he hung up with a sigh. Marguerite, of course, had overheard his end of the conversation.

"Helen sick?" she asked, demurely.

"No," snapped Peter, "she's only crazy." He started to cut the everlasting daylights out of an unoffending piece of copy. Marguerite maintained a discreet silence.

Later in the day came a telephone summons from Birmingham who talked first with Marguerite and then with Peter. There was to be a lines-and-business rehearsal of Sadie Greenbaum at 7 sharp. Peter promised to be there. By the way, there was a letter in the box office for him. From the Ben Straus offices. It could wait. He would get it when he came to rehearsal.

Ben Straus was one of the largest wholesale dealers in theatrical entertainment on Broadway. Usually he announced annually the production of twenty-five or thirty plays for the coming season and sometimes he actually produced as many as five or six. Straus went into the thing on a large scale.

Peter and Marguerite left the office together at 5 o'clock. He suggested a quiet little dinner in some place where they could talk.

"I don't know why it is," he said across the little table, "but somehow I can come to you with my troubles and it seems—ah—perfectly natural."

"I know just what you mean," murmured Marguerite, aglow within.

"This business of Helen," went on Peter, crumbling bread nervously. "She went quite dippy over the telephone this morning and demanded my immediate presence at her diggings. And when I got there she jolly well kicked over the dear old apple cart—swore she wouldn't go near the theater—threw up the whole business and all that sort of thing."

"Why?" asked Marguerite and in her green eyes was the expression of a patient tabby watching a mouse-hole.

"She made some—ah—ridiculous demands which I couldn't for a moment consider."

"Such as——?"

"Oh, that's not material. I don't know what possessed the girl."

"I do," announced Marguerite. "I could see a cyclone coming when I happened to mention that I'd landed a job on the Guardian. I didn't think it was a secret."

"It isn't—far be it!" exclaimed Peter. "I'm a free agent, by George!"

"*Are* you?"

"Emphatically and eternally YES!" declared Peter, flushing.

"Of course, I didn't know. You two seem to be so —well—affectionate."

"WE are?" asked Peter, aghast.

"Well, not so much you, but that's because you are incapable of affection."

"Oh, I say!"

"That kind of affection, I mean. You're a bully good pal, Peter, but as a lover you are a British joke. I speak from observation, not personal experience," she hastened to add. "There's no use your straining your poor conscience, you know, fibbing about yourself and Helen. She practically bragged about the night she spent in your rooms. Everybody knows it."

Peter was thunderstruck. He again felt very much like a betrayed gentleman.

"B—but!" he sputtered, "did she mention the fact that I left the house and went to an Hotel?"

"AN Hotel? How utterly and thoroughly English you are!"

"Not a bit of it! I'm American to the core—positively. I'll be a citizen as soon as I'm let. By mere accident of birth, I may be English, but I come of an old American family, you know. Millard Fillmore was a son of one of my direct maternal ancestors."

"Millard Fillmore?"

"Yes—no less. What do you think of that?"

"Who's he?"

"Millard Fillmore?" Peter was shocked. "Why, he was the thirteenth president of the United States!"

"Oh, him," said Marguerite, carelessly. "The thirteenth? Doesn't it make you nervous? So you're related to the little old White House and you're a hundred per cent Yankee, by heck, but Peter, darling, you certainly don't act the part. Now tell me, what did Helen say about ME?"

"Nothing—that is, nothing especial," he replied.

"How disappointing. Isn't it time to start for rehearsal?"

On the way she hugged his arm chummily.

"And he left the house and went to an hotel!" she thought happily. "What a fine, clean darling he is, to be sure!"

They reached the theater on the stroke of 7. Punctuality was a weakness with Peter. Mr. Crane, of "What is Morality?" fame was just leaving. He looked tired, but smiled cynically at Peter.

"Your turn next," he said. "I hope for your sake the girl who understudies Helen in your bit is better than the one they wished on to me. What's the matter with Helen, anyway? Can't you keep your sweetie in order better than that?"

Peter glared at him, but the house was too dark for Crane to notice. He attributed Peter's sullen silence to jealousy.

The cast of the B. C. show, as it had come to be called, were on hand. Miss Greenbaum was huddled in a chair poring over a part book. Birmingham, surprisingly sober, waved his hand in greeting.

"Welcome to Elsinor!" he cried, "And now children, we're all here and ready to start. By the way, Peter; get that—you know—the letter?"

"Thanks for reminding me," said Peter and went for it. As he passed into the tiny lobby he met Helen, coming in. He started in astonishment at the vision. She was serene and smiling and greeted him with affectionate gayety.

"Hello, Bad Boy!" she cried, "Why so early at the show shop? By the way, there's a letter for you. I got one, too."

She held up a lemon-colored envelope.

"I hardly expected you," he said, flushing. Helen looked mildly surprised.

"No? On account of this morning? You mustn't take things so serious, Pet. Us poor weak women say things we don't mean, sometimes. What in the world is the row inside?"

She glanced through the doorway and stiffened as she realized what was going on.

"What do they mean?" she demanded, "rehearsing that Greenbaum joke in MY part! Anybody been telling 'em I'm dead, or anything?"

"I took the precaution of warning them that you'd told me you had quit and——"

"Oh, Peter! You perfectly delicious Boob! Did ums believe him sweetie because she had a teenie weenie little grouch on?"

"You were most convincing, but you are not my swee—"

"Forget it, Darling."

She strode into the auditorium and addressed the stage generally:

"Hey, folks; what's the grand idea?"

Peter continued to the box-office and got his letter. It was in a square salmon colored envelope.

"Dear Sir: (he read) Have sat through your Very Much B. C. and heartily enjoyed same. Would be pleased to have you call at your convenience and talk over writing a play for us. Would suggest you telephone for appointment and oblige,

Yours truly,

BEN STRAUS, PER G. R.

Peter glowed. A large and important mountain had come to Mahomet. He wondered if he dared attempt a long play for the tremendous Ben Straus. He felt a sudden barrenness of ideas and it threw him into a panic. He must tell Marguerite. She would suggest something, start his mind working along the right road. She was full of ideas.

He returned to the auditorium. Sadie Greenbaum was sitting, remote and forlorn, weeping. Nobody was paying any attention to her. His heart softened with pity at the poor child's disappointment and he stopped and placed a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. She looked up with a tear-smeared face.

"Don't you mind, dear;" he said, kindly, "your time will come."

"That's what they all say, but it never does!" sniffed Sadie, miserably. "I been mulling this part over all day and I know I could just eat it up, and now THIS has to happen!"

Peter felt guilty. He should not have been so precipitate with his tidings.

"I wish I was dead," said Sadie, blowing a nose that was both red and Roman.

"Now, now——" said Peter, remorsefully. "Cheer up, Girlie."

"Yes," retorted Sadie. "that's right. Cheer up, the worst is yet to come." She resumed her weeping.

"See here!" said Peter in sudden desperation, "I'll write a nice little piece, just for you; a corking part, whatever you like, anything you say—and we'll put it into the very next bill."

Sadie, transformed, gazed up at him as if enjoying a vision of Heaven.

"Is—is it a PROMISE?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Oh, absolutely," replied Peter with a smile.

"Gee!" said Sadie, rising radiant. "I could kiss you all over for that!"

Peter shuddered. His heart was American, but his propriety was British and he held nothing in common with such Russian notions.

On the stage they were holding a sort of jubilee over the restoration of the prodigal. Only Marguerite was calm. Helen was explaining gayly that she and Peter had merely had a little love-spat and the silly darling had gone and taken her seriously.

"As if I'd throw my pals down!" cried Helen. "As if I'd go and queer my own sweetie's show."

Meanwhile, Peter, deaf to the world, was in a chair re-reading the Ben Straus letter.

Marguerite looked steadily at the radiant Helen and her lip assumed a curl.

"I don't seem to remember," she said slowly, "that when you told about spending the night at Peter's place that time, you mentioned that he had gone to an hotel."

Helen turned a dull red.

"Is that so?" she retorted. "Well, I'm not responsible for your rotten memory."

The others on the stage were interested.

"It's a very good memory, indeed," said Marguerite,

and the reason I don't remember it is because you somehow forgot to put it in your cock-and-bull story."

"You got a crush on him yourself," exclaimed the trembling Helen, preparing to get emotional. Marguerite turned on her French heel.

"The next time I hear you refer to Mr. Millard as your Sweetie," she warned her, "I'll tell the world about how he ran out on you and went to the hotel."

It was a declaration of war.

"Say, darlin', now listen, Pet," said Birmingham, coming down stage in a flutter and addressing both girls impartially, "we musn't have any hard feelin' in this lil' company or I can see our finish. Brotherly love. That's the idea. Everything harmonious. Only way we can get team work."

"Shut up, Birmy," said Marguerite, crisply.

Helen left the stage through the side door and, spying Peter in the gloom, went to him.

"Who's your letter from?" she asked and did not wait for a reply. "Mine's from—just guess! Arthur Baildon. And think of it! He wants me to come around tomorrow and talk over an engagement! Me up on Broadway with the kid-gloviest, high-toniest producer of the bunch! I bet this crowd will be sorry when my last appearance comes around. But it's just as well. An artist like me has got to have harmonious surroundings or they can't do our our best work. Well, so long, Sw——"

She gave a frightened glance toward the stage.

"So long, Peter," she amended, "I got to get a bite to eat before I make up for the evening."

Birmingham approached, with a sheepish grin.

"Well, Son," he said, jovially, "we sort of went off at half-cock, didn't we? About Helen. That's the

worst of dames. You can never depend on 'em; not even to quit."

"She tells me Arthur Baildon has sent for her," observed Peter. Birmingham looked serious.

"That's the way of the world," he sighed. "We find 'em and develop 'em and the big fish go and steal 'em. Then they claim all the credit. I'll have one whale of a time finding another Helen. They don't grow on bushes; but such is life. That reminds me. What does Ben Straus want of you, if it ain't an impertinent question?"

Peter handed the letter he still held in his hand to the stage director, who read it with a thoughtful frown.

CHAPTER VIII.

PETER RECEIVES EXCELLENT ADVICE WHICH HE TOTALLY FAILS TO APPRECIATE.

"PRETTY soft," murmured Birmingham, handing back the letter. "You might have cooled your heels outside the Straus offices with the finest play in the world under your arm until the crack of doom. But you hoe your own row, nice and quiet and rumors reach 'em about you and they come sneakin' down to catch your stuff and then you're all to the mustard. Got any scripts in your trunk?"

"Very Much B. C. is the only play I ever wrote," said Peter.

"You're some Wizard! You take your lil' typewriter on your lap and you put over a winner the first time out. I got to hand it to you. What are you goin' to do about Straus?"

"Why," said Peter, mildly astonished by the question, "I intend to telephone, as he suggests, and then call, of course."

"Got any ideas in your nut?"

"Not one."

"That's good. You might spill it, if you had, and then they'd turn it over to some pet playwright of their own to work up and you'd get the raspberry. I wouldn't trust my own father in this business. That Broadway gang feels better over gypping a guy out of a dollar than they do over making a hundred on the level."

Peter maintained a discreet silence, but he thought:

"Poor old hack. He's missed success and it has soured him."

Birmingham appeared to be uneasy. Several times he started to speak, only to change his mind. Finally he nerved himself to say:

"Come around to the Dutchman's back room for a lil' pow. You needn't be afraid I'll souse up on you. I'm on the wagon for good. Doctor's orders. I want to have one of those heart-to-heart talks like Mother used to make. Not on my account, but on yours. I got to wise you up a lil' bit and the sooner the quicker."

"Lemon and seltzer for mine," said Birmingham to the lunch-boy, who also acted, on occasion, as waiter and relief bartender. He said it aggressively, even virtuously. Peter said he would take the same.

"Now," said Birmingham, with savage determination, "let me have the stage a minute and try to get my slant on this business. You're on the right road, thank Gawd. You been damn lucky and you deserve your luck, because you got the goods. You put over a wow the very first crack and that doesn't happen once in a million times. Most authors write a trunkful of bum dramas that never see the light before they learn the ropes. Look at Clyde Fitch. Look at lots of 'em.

"Now, Son," said Birmingham, "don't let's smear things. If it ain't a sassy question, how old are you?"

"Twenty-two," replied Peter, feeling absurdly young. Birmingham's comment intensified that feeling.

"Just a mere baby! I'm twice that plus ten and look at me. Facing the sunset and nobody ever heard of me. You're twenty-two and you've written a hit. A nice lil' one-act hit.

"Let's analyze this, now, hit of yours: First off you

got a peach of an idea—cave man stuff. I don't know where you stole it from and I ain't asking—Now! Now!——"

Peter was indignantly denying that he had stolen the idea.

"Leave it at that," agreed Birmingham, soothingly. "It just drifted into your mind like a maiden's dream; all right, that goes. Well, as I say, it's such a peach of an idea that it would be hard to write a flop around it. It runs twenty-eight minutes and doesn't have a chance to lag. The scenery and legs would hold it up that long. You got some good legitimate laughs; I'm givin' you credit, you understand—all the credit in the world. BUT, just stop and think a minute what Geebee Shaw or Johnny Galsworthy would have done with that idea; or this fellow Barrie, or Georgie Cohan, or any one of a bunch of wise ones."

Peter stiffened with a sense of injustice, through which was threaded a strain of jealousy. Why bring in those other confounded chaps?

"Now, get me right," pleaded Birmingham, poking a stubby forefinger at him. "This isn't a knock. I love you like a son, Kid. It isn't booze that's talkin', either. My old Frien' Doc. Grey told me I had six months to live if I didn't cut it out and I want to live to see you up in big electric lights on the Big Street. You've started well, Son; you got the goods in you. Only don't go and get the idea that you're all there, yet. Tha's all. I don't need to tell you that the wise lads I just mentioned could have taken that idea and done more with it than you did. And why could they? Because they are grown-up men who have lived and loved and suffered and so naturally have a big advantage over a bright kid who's just breakin' out of his shell. That's your only

trouble: You are YOUNG. And you'll sure get over that in time."

"Does my extreme youth betray itself in 'Very Much B. C.?'" asked Peter, showing by his aloofness how hurt he was.

"You said it. It does," replied Birmingham. "The play is good—nobody's denying it—but it's superficially clever. Get that? It's smart Alec stuff; your characters are all on the outside, there's no depth to them. Even that Mother stuff that hits 'em between the ribs on account of the way Helen gets it over is hearsay. You've read about it, but you don't know it out of your own experience."

"Neither does Helen, who, you admit, gets it over," retorted Peter. "And also," he continued, "I share a disadvantage with all other men writers in never having been a mother."

He thought he had him there.

"Smart Alec stuff, but clever," mused Birmingham, as to himself. "As for Helen, the mother is born in a woman. A girl kid cryin' over a busted doll is a mother mourning her child. That's no argument."

"It would appear," said Peter, icily, "that you've brought me here to tell me how rotten 'B. C.' is, although every newspaper in town failed to find the weakness you so delicately point out."

"Cut that out, Son," barked Birmingham. "That's a lil' case of swelled-head talkin' now. Try to get me right and catch my drift. Good Gawd, Son; I'm trying to smooth your way, not throw the hooks into you!"

"Thank you for your kind intentions."

"Hear me out. I'm comin' to where I was aiming. You'll go to Ben Straus and he'll kid you along, figuring that maybe you got something good in your system which

he might make a coupla million bucks out of. You'll go away with your head in the clouds and dash off a three-act masterpiece which the pinheads in the Straus office will say is great because it was written by the author of a hit. They wouldn't know a play on its merits if it came up and poked 'em in the eye. As for Ben Straus, he 'reads' a play in a minute and a half by by riffling the pages to see how many lines of red ink, underscoring the business, there are in it. Plenty of red ink, plenty of action; no red ink, all talk. That's how he judges a play.

"The hell of it is," mused Birmingham, sadly, "that you'll write him a play and he'll go and produce the darn thing right out there on Broadway and you'll have to stand or fall by something that in ten years you might be ashamed off!"

"Well," asked Peter, suffering,, "what do you suggest?"

Birmingham perceptibly brightened.

"Go and see Ben Straus," he advised, "and let him do all the talking. Don't commit yourself. Thank Gawd you haven't any stuff in your trunk to queer you. Tell him you'll be glad to let him read your next when you've written it, but don't make any cracks about when that'll be. Be nice and polite and not much more like a bloody icicle than you are this minute. I'll bet you could perspire ice water in August. Then make your getaway and resign yourself to learning your trade before you make the big plunge. Write some more lil' gems for this outfit. The royalties will keep you going."

"Royalties?" Peter's eyebrows went up. He did not quite catch the drift.

"Sure. What are you drawing down for 'B. C.'?"

"Why," gasped Peter, "I'm not drawing anything."

Birmingham grunted exactly as if Peter had hit him in the stomach.

"Talk about babes in the woods!" he moaned. "Do you know what present prices are in the box office? Two plasters per seat all over the house. Do you know what they used to be? Seventy-five and one dollar. They were playin' to three or four hundred a week, out of which they paid me sixty. Now they're takin' four hundred dollars a night, which is capacity, and 'Very Much B. C.' is drawin' every darn cent of it. Chuck out the two other plays in the bill and nobody would know the difference. Chuck out yours and there wouldn't be any customers. The worst of it is that in putting you hep I'm swelling that English nut of yours about eight sizes, which is what I was tryin' to keep away from.

"Drawing down nothing!" wailed Mr. Birmingham. "Can you beat it?"

"Nothing was said to me about royalties," explained Peter. "I supposed, of course, that I was in the same boat with the other authors, doing my bit for the uplift of Art, so to speak."

Birmingham was silent for a long minute. Then he awoke from his reverie with a snap.

"Don't you dast say I put you up to it," he cautioned, "because I can't afford to scrap with my bread-and-butter, but you go to that lil' rat Levanski and tell him you've had a big offer for 'B. C.' in vaudeville and give him one week to withdraw it."

"But that," said Peter, "would be a lie."

"I see you get the idea exactly," replied Birmingham, grinning. "So you tell him that and then sit back and let nature take its course. Ten dollars a performance is your upset price; not a cent less. That's the offer you got for vaudeville. See?"

"Oh," said Peter, "I couldn't possibly coerce him with a falsehood."

Birmingham stared at him in disgust. Then he stretched his right leg and explored his trousers' pocket, bringing to light a rumpled wad of bills. These he counted.

"Twenty-eight plunks. Three goes back, leaving twenty-five. Give me a contract for 'B. C.' at sixty per week royalty, twenty-five advance paid, and I'll peddle the act myself. I'll guarantee a production in six weeks and a season of thirty, pay or play. There's your bona fide offer, you poor fish, and I hope for my sake you'll take it!"

Peter was flattered by the sincerity of Birmingham's offer, but thought it would be dishonorable to withdraw the piece from the Community crowd in this arbitrary manner.

"I only wish I had twenty-seven million one dollar bills," sighed the stage director, "I'd rather let you hold 'em for me than put 'em in the National City Bank; they'd be safer. But, anyway, you know what to do. If Levanski squeals, my offer goes, only don't let on that I tipped you off."

CHAPTER IX.

HELEN HEARS A FEW TRUTHS ABOUT HERSELF.

HELEN ROBBINS was full of dreams of Broadway triumphs under the aristocratic direction of Arthur Baildon that evening and put on insufferable airs in the dressing room. She asked advice of the other girls as to which hat and which gown to select for her conquest of Mr. Baildon. That is, she asked advice of all the girls except Marguerite, whom she pointedly ignored.

She made her grand entrée into the Baildon establishment from a hired limousine which almost looked as if it might be a private car. Her nerves were on edge, but her business instincts were in keen working order. She hoped she would not be obliged to wait and suffer the tortures of suspense. She was referred by a crisp switchboard girl to a handsome man with waving white hair, who seemed to be haunting the outer office aimlessly. He greeted her with flattering cordiality. Later she learned from a bitter fellow-professional that he was Clarence Melrow, who, she told Helen, "had the hand-shaking privilege in the Baildon office."

Mr. Melrow conducted her personally to the inner sanctum of the great Arthur Baildon, who was seated languidly at an enormous and expensive desk which, like the sanctum itself, was in meticulous order. The great man rose gracefully to greet her, stared at her long and disconcertingly, and then motioned her to a seat facing

one of the large windows, while he himself sat with his back to the light.

"I came in answer——" began Helen.

"Yes—yes—" interrupted Mr. Baildon, wearily. "I know—I know."

He ran a delicate white hand through his mane of brown hair and ostentatiously suffered. Now and again his piercing glance would go through the patiently sitting Helen, who felt like a plump pullet on a spit.

Mr. Baildon seemed to be strung on particularly sensitive wires. His most striking feature was his eyebrows, which were thick and overhanging like a porch roof. Helen noticed that he was exquisitely attired. Her observations were interrupted by a sort of internal explosion on the part of Mr. Baildon:

"My dear child!" he exclaimed, apparently on the verge of weeping, "what in God's name have you been doing to yourself?"

She had a panicky feeling that something was wrong with her hat or her hair.

"Whu—what do you mean?" she stammered.

"When I saw you play ten or twelve weeks ago," he moaned, "you were plump—yes—agreeably plump, but you couldn't afford another ounce. Now look at you! Why—you're FAT!"

"I'm sorry," faltered Helen, weakly.

"Sorry!" he snapped, "you ought to be flogged. How dare you get fat? You've upset all my calculations. You won't do at all. I cannot be handicapped at the outset like that. God knows it would be torture and trouble enough to make anything of you under the most favorable circumstances, but I was willing to try. You seemed to have the—ah—artistic Germ, the crude raw material—but This!"

His despairing hand again brushed his mass of hair. Helen was ready to drop through the floor. A bright idea suddenly occurred to her.

"I suppose," she faltered, "I could get back to what I weighed when you saw me."

This seemed to strike Mr. Baildon as a feasible suggestion.

"Could you? It would have to go into the contract," he snapped. "Imagine a fat Nazimova, or Fiske, or Winwood, or Pavlowa, or Ulrich! Impossible. How much do you weigh this minute?"

"I dunno," whimpered Helen, feeling like a balloon.

"You should know. It's your first duty to know. Before you can expect to attract the mind you must attract the eye. You said you'd reduce. Be it so. Turkish baths. Massage. Roll on the floor. How old are you?"

"Nineteen," said Helen.

"How OLD are you!" he shouted. "I want the truth!"

"Twenty-four," she blurted, "and I'll get my birth certificate, if you insist."

"Of course, I insist. I must know all about you. Your parents? Russian? Polish? German? Come! Come! What ARE your parents?"

"Rur—russian."

"Jews, of course?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"I swore I would never attempt another Jewess," declared Mr. Baildon in the complaining tone of one who is being persuaded against his will. "They are ut-terly impossible! But let that pass."

Helen let it pass.

"Where were you educated?"

"I went to public school in Providence."

"High school?"

"No, sir. When I was fourteen they put me in a factory."

Mr. Baildon stared at her.

"And you come here and expect me to make a star of you?" he demanded, outraged.

"You wrote and asked me to come," faltered Helen.

"So I did. I remember. Let that pass. I had no idea. I'm sorry. Too bad. You are fat, you are Hebraic, you are uneducated and ill-bred. You won't do."

Mr. Baildon stood up with a motion of finality. Helen's head swam with the agony of her disappointment. But her persistency came to her rescue. She sat where she was in defiance of his gesture of dismissal.

"But, Mr. Baildon!" she protested, "when you saw me act I was just the same as I am now, only maybe not so fat. You're a smart man, but you didn't get on that I was ill-bred or uneducated and I guess I couldn't have looked so Hebraic, either, from the front, or you'd have noticed it then. If I could get by *you* when I'm working, wouldn't I get by the audiences, too?"

He stared at her with that disturbingly penetrating gaze and sank into his chair.

"I must cogitate," he moaned. "I must think."

He made a ceremony of thinking, tapping his brow with the heel of his open palm. Then he barked again:

"Married?"

"No, sir."

"Are you SURE?"

Helen was sure.

"That would be the last straw," almost sobbed Mr. Baildon. "I could not manage a husband. Husbands are vermin. They are—what shall I call it?—destructive influences. Either you live for your Art, your career, or you live to have babies and a husband. They don't mix.

It must go into the contract. A pound over a hundred-and-thirty, or one, single husband, and the whole thing is all off."

Helen sat silent. It was the wisest course.

"Where have you played?" he demanded suddenly.

"Only in Greenwich Village."

"Amateur!" proclaimed Mr. Baildon wildly to a scandalized universe. "Let that pass. You will have less to unlearn. Who's the director?"

"Reginald Birmingham."

"Birmingham? Birmingham? Do I know him?"

Helen could not say, and so didn't.

"Sloppy direction. Lick-and-promise direction."

"We all think he's very good," protested Helen, her sense of loyalty impelling her to madness.

"Think?" he shouted. "You're not paid to think. I will do the thinking. You obey."

"Yes, sir."

"What's your salary?"

"Hundred-and-twenty-five," she lied, without hesitation, having rehearsed this line.

"Pre-posterous. I don't believe you."

She had taken a chance that perhaps he might, so this retort did not especially dismay her. She did not know that Mr. Baildon had an uncanny gift of estimatting almost to a dollar the amount of money in any given audience.

"I don't say you are not worth it," he explained, "but you are not getting it. I don't say you are not worth ten times that. If you cannot earn more you are of no use to me. But you are raw material; terribly raw material. You may have the Germ, the Spark, but you have no technic. It is for me to develop the spark and implant the technic. I waste myself, I throw myself away, I

kill myself creating artists who ungratefully take all the credit to themselves."

"I will be grateful, Mr. Baildon," pleaded Helen in her most poignant voice.

He cocked a sudden ear.

"Say that again."

"I said I would be grateful," repeated Helen, informatively.

"No—no—no! Not like that. As you first said it. Give it to me with all you have. Now, then."

Helen caught the idea. She gave it to him with all she had. It was like a rehearsal.

"Not so bad. We can work on that. Remember, same tone, not a particle of variation. Once more."

"I will be grateful, Mr. Baildon," breathed Helen with her whole soul.

"Let that pass. Now, then, why don't you ask me what I am planning for you?"

Helen obliged.

"First of all," he mused, "I must find a place for you in the sticks. A year in the sticks will do you a world of good. You need thirty or forty parts. Say, forty. No! First of all you must lose that fat. Come to me in a month weighing a hundred-and-thirty and then I will find a place for you. The salary will be small. Never mind; I will make it up out of my own pocket. Money? God, what's money to me?"

As a matter of fact money was a great deal to Mr. Baildon, who was notoriously shrewd at a bargain, but he affected sublime contempt for it. If Helen thought to take advantage of his scorn for mere money, she was severely disillusioned.

The upshot of the interview was that Helen was to return in a month, or as soon as she had reduced her

weight to the number of pounds specified in the contemplated bond. Then she was to place herself under the sole and exclusive management of Mr. Baildon for a period of ten years, giving him an option on a renewal for a similar term of years. During her novitiate her salary was to be sixty-five dollars a week. Baildon already had in mind a stock manager who, on his recommendation, would pay double that, which difference would go into the Baildon pocket. In the event of his featuring or starring her, this salary was to be materially increased and she would share in the profits. It sounded sweet to Helen.

Mr. Baildon dismissed her. As she was about to depart enveloped in a rosy cloud, he barked:

"Your address. Your telephone number. In case I should have need of you."

She gave the required information and departed, still enveloped in her rosy cloud of elation. She had been called gross, uneducated, ill-bred and a liar, but this disturbed her not at all. She had gained her point. The almost private-looking limousine had been dismissed and she returned to the Village via elevated railway. On the train she was struck with the thought that all must now be ended between herself and Peter. She loved poor Peter dearly, but she had higher game in sight. The Marguerite cat might have him and welcome. Wouldn't she be just dippy with jealousy and envy when she heard the big news!

Another thought occurred to her. She must seriously go about reducing her weight. This was a hardship, for Helen loved her meals. But if Baildon had insisted she would have amputated her right hand. Anything to be a Baildon star! It was worth any sacrifice. She hated to be licked in her patient pursuit of Peter and

she hated to diet. Peter and potatoes and butter must go out of her life. She did not analyze her feelings, but probably she mourned less over the loss of the still un-won Peter than she did over the potatoes and butter.

CHAPTER X.

PETER SIGNS A LITTLE CONTRACT AND LOSES HELEN

"WHAT'S-yer-name-and-what-d'ye-want-to-see-him-about?" demanded a future theatrical magnate, now aged 14, of the timid Peter, as the latter, having telephoned, as per request of Mr. Straus, now made his punctual appearance at the outer gate of the offices.

Peter produced his card and remarked that he had an appointment. The future theatrical magnate appeared seriously to doubt this, but grudgingly carried away the card. After a brief interval he reappeared.

"This way," he muttered, as if beaten this time, but hoping for revenge.

Peter entered a severely appointed private office and was greeted by a self-effacing little man whose gesture seemed to convey an apology for living. The powerful Straus certainly did not look the part. His garmenture was perfect, expensive and subdued. He wore no jewelry, having been informed early in his career that jewelry was vulgar. He looked as if he had this moment left the hands of a barber and a clothes presser. He appeared to be honored and flattered that Peter should have condescended to come to him. It almost seemed as if he had lived but for this moment. He begged his visitor to be seated. He wanted to tell him how much he had enjoyed that little play—that—what was its title?

"We feel sure," said Mr. Straus with a meek smile, "that you have a future; oh, yes, a v-e-r-y definite future. Did you bring a play with you?"

The mild Straus eye seemed searching for evidence that Peter had. Peter regretted that "Very Much B. C." was his maiden effort and Straus looked disappointed, but brightened even as he was shaking his sympathetic head.

"Of course," he bleated, "you have the idee for a play? I thought so. Idees are what make plays. Idees are what are needed on Broadway. I assure you, Mr. ——" he glanced at Peter's card—"I assure you, Mr. Millard, we are compelled to produce the rubbish we do because our authors don't give us idees. They give us technic, tailor-made characters, conventional action, but the idees aren't there."

Peter murmured his sympathy.

"Now what, Mr. Millard, would you say offhand was a good idee for an up-to-date play which you would write for us?"

The gleam in Mr. Straus' eye was not lost on Peter, who recalled Birmingham's warning, and replied that it was only the germ of an idea and not enough developed to stand exposition. Mr. Straus understood, perfectly. He would contain his natural curiosity, but would Mr. Millard undertake to let the Straus offices have first chance at his play when it was written. Mr. Millard would be delighted.

"Now, let us understand this," bleated Mr. Straus, who used a curious mixture of cultivated English and translated Yiddish in his converse with mankind. "When your play is written you would let us see the script before any other producer whatever?"

"Oh, absolutely," replied Peter. The word "abso-

lutely" seemed to strike a responsive chord in the Straus breast; he used it himself frequently.

"Of course," he beamed, "we would not ask you to do this without any consideration. For such a privilege we would expect to pay." He scribbled absently on a pad of notepaper.

"I suggest, Mr. Millard, that we would sign a little memorandum showing that for and in consideration of—shall we say fifty dollars?—you would undertake to submit to us in—shall we say six months?—the script of an original full-length play, before same is submitted elsewhere. If we could not use the play the option would be forfeited and no harm done, but if our readers should O. K. the script, then we would make a contract to produce the play and the fifty would go as part of an advance royalty to be agreed on."

Peter saw no harm in this suggestion. He mentally calculated that it had taken him approximately four hours, actual working time, to toss off "Very Much B. C." He could write six plays in six months! He expressed his willingness to enter the outlined agreement and Mr. Straus was overwhelmed with gratification. He pressed a button and mentioned that the weather was favorable to the theatrical business. He asked anxiously how the Village enterprise was faring and was delighted when he heard that everything was top hole.

The future magnate entered and Mr. Straus extended two slips of paper.

"You would take this to the legal department with instructions it is to be attended to immediately," he suggested meekly, "and this you would take to the auditing department and bring me the cheque for signing. Wait for it."

The future magnate adored Mr. Straus with his eyes,

murmured "yessir," and departed. The producer arose and held out a manicured hand.

"Any time you call, Mr. Millard," he said, "you will find the little memorandum and cheque waiting for you. Give us an hour, or drop in tomorrow. I beg that you would suit your own convenience. I am gambling you will write a first-class, original play with plenty of good idees."

Peter went his way, feeling very important indeed. The mighty Straus had deferred to his genius in a manner to warm the cockles of his self-esteem. Peter would certainly seize the opportunity to show what he could do for Broadway and Straus. The germ of an idea promised to be fruitful. Above all, he would prove the well-meaning but misguided Birmingham to be all wrong in his estimate. Peter would show him!

For a long time he looked back on this day as one of the luckiest in his life. For note what it had accomplished for him! He had tied himself up to Straus. He had, earlier, forced Levanski into a private interview, as a result of which the Community Players were permitted to continue the presentation of "Very Much B. C." on immediate payment of $120, two weeks' back royalty, and a future weekly payment of $60 for as long as it should run. And that same evening, when he went back stage to report his day's doings to Birmingham, Helen cornered him with her own glorious news and ended by telling him that hereafter they had better not be seen much together.

She gave him a highly colored account of the momentous interview with Baildon, from which he gathered that she had laid down rigid conditions and Baildon had gratefully accepted them.

"But, Peter, darling," she continued, ready tears com-

ing into her eyes, "there was one thing Arthur insisted on. I must devote my life to my art. He asked me did I have a husband or a sweetie and I told him no! He was terribly suspicious and like as not he'll have me watched. When I told him I was nineteen he even asked me to get a certified copy of my birth certificate, but thank goodness, that won't bother me any. He's like that. Suspicious. He wanted me to quit this Village bunch right away, but I said no. I said, 'you know, Arthur, you wouldn't want me to throw you down and I can't throw down my pals that have put me where I am. I must give them at least a month's notice and, anyway, before I start my new career with you I want to get fit. I feel like I'm out of condition and fat.' He said no, I was exactly right, but that's the way I feel, so I'm goin' to diet and exercise."

She looked at him through gathering tears, but first she glanced about to see if Marguerite were within earshot.

"About that other," she said, with a wan smile, "about being seen together, you know, why, there's no other way out of it. I'll never forget what you told me that time, that you loved me, but from now on we must each go our own way."

Peter saw the point at once.

"It is quite all right," he agreed, heartily, "oh, absolutely. And I will be fairly busy myself. I'm to write a play for Ben Straus, no less!"

"Isn't that fine!" said Helen. "Well, we'll shake hands on what I said."

Peter found Birmingham in the closet known as the property room and told him what had happened at the Straus interview. Quite as if his sinister warning had vanished out of his mind, Birmingham expressed en-

thusiastic delight. He slapped Peter on the back and called him "Son." He predicted great things and a career of gilded affluence. But when he was alone again he sighed and shook his head.

"Poor kid," he thought. "What I tried to wise him up to went in one ear and out the other. Well, anyway, here's hoping!"

A month later Peter took stock of his finances and the result gratified him. Money was piling in. The addition of the "B. C." royalty to his English income and his Guardian salary made him feel like a bloated capitalist. When the Straus play had been written, set to running on Broadway, he would be positively rotten with money. He had made unobtrusive inquiries of Birmingham and had learned that royalties on a moderately successful play amounted to five or six hundred dollars a week. With a smash, or a wow, they would reach a thousand. Peter contemplated a wow. He could conceive nothing less.

Birmingham was acting a bit chastened and subdued since that evening when he had bruised Peter's self-esteem with his well-meant but drastic advice. He was still sober. That doctor must certainly have thrown a tremendous scare into him. When Peter called for his first weekly royalty at the box office and it was handed to him by Levanski with a look of heart-breaking reproach, Birmingham strolled by and noted the transaction with a characteristic shamefaced grin.

On another occasion they discussed Straus and Peter remarked on the powerful one's meekness.

"Don't ever let that fool you," grinned Birmingham. "Ben Straus may act like a Polish peddler looking to have the door slammed in his face, but he's one of the slickest propositions on Broadway. He used to peddle

shoestrings and had to watch out for the cops and he never got over that timid, shrinkin' way which made the cops sorry for him. But that same way is what got him where he is. He looks so helpless that those who don't know him forget to watch out. It's part of his system; when he's the most helpless he's the most dangerous in a deal. Don't ever waste any time bein' sorry for Ben Straus. Started your new play yet?"

"No," confessed Peter, fidgeting, "and it's worrying me. Now that I am committed to it, I don't seem able to get started."

"Agony of commencement," commented Birmingham. "I know how it is."

"Did *you* ever write a play?" asked Peter.

"I've done everything about a show shop from striking sets to going on as Othello when the star was drunker'n I was," grinned the veteran, the light of reminiscence in his eyes.

"By Jove! Tell me about the play."

"Nothin' much to tell. I was out with a traveling repertoire bunch and the main squeeze couldn't pay royalties. He was an honest guy and wouldn't turn pirate, so there we were, company organized, lots of nice paper on hand that had been paid for in advance, a route laid out in some pretty reliable tank towns where we were known and all we needed was a few dramas.

"Bill Shakespeare wrote 'The play's the thing,' and he didn't mean it just the way they accept it, but if he *had* meant it that way, it would have been the truest thing Old Bill ever wrote. Well," said Birmingham, quietly, "I didn't care much about counting ties back to Herald Square in the middle of a bad season and there were several regular troupers in the bunch that I liked. Nice boys, with families depending on 'em, you know. So I

says to myself: 'You've seen several authors, Old Scout, and Gawd knows they don't look like much. You certainly carry as hefty a load of brains as some of 'em. So why not dash off a few actable scripts to fit the pretty lithos we got in our trunk and save the company from goin' bust?' "

"I see!" exclaimed Peter, interested. "Well?"

"Well, I started to do that lil' thing. Situations all picked out for me, in the lithos, you know. The trick was to write scenes to fit the pictures without stealing the play they were made for. I tackled an idea that came to me, workin' in trains and in my dressin' room and in hotel lobbies and, lo and behold, I turned out a script that was pretty rotten, but full of stuff that always had got over before and might keep on gettin' over; sure-fire stuff, you know.

"I showed the script to the Main Squeeze and he grabbed it like a drowning man grabs a straw. We chucked it into rehearsal, covered some lithos with my title and sneaked it on at some tank, I forget which one. Three rehearsals were all we'd had, but I've put on shows in two, and, do you know, the blame stuff got over pretty well, considering. So we stopped being a rep. company and just stuck to that one play, and it brought us home at the end of the season with salaries in our pockets."

"What was the name of the piece?"

"Out on the lamp-wick circuit we called it 'The Finger of Fate,' but when I caught it on Broadway they'd changed the name to 'The Long Arm.' "

Peter stared at him in open astonishment.

" 'The Long Arm!' " he exclaimed. "Why—wasn't that a reigning hit about five or six seasons back? Surely it was. I saw it in London when I was a kid. Two brothers in love with the same girl? Was that it?"

"And the brother who won her had killed a bully in self-defense, so the other brother took the crime on his own shoulders. That's the identical baby. And you caught it in London? Ain't it a small world, after all!"

"And you wrote 'The Long Arm!'" marveled Peter.

"No, Son," replied Birmingham, gravely, "I wrote 'The Finger of Fate.' Percival Wainwright wrote 'The Long Arm.' He wrote it all out nice and crossed all the t's and dotted all the i's that I'd overlooked. He changed the locale from Kentucky to California. I had my moon rise left and he made it rise right. I had a ruined mill and he had a ruined mission. My hero's name was John and his was Robert. But the guts of the thing, ninety per cent of the lines and every damn one of the situations in my 'Finger of Fate' were in his 'Long Arm.'"

"Stole it!" gasped Peter, deeply shocked.

Birmingham smiled and shook his head.

"Bought it," he amended. "When the season ended there was a girl I wanted to marry and I needed all the cash money I could get my hands on, so the Main Squeeze dug down into his profits and paid me five hundred for the play, lock, stock and barrel. I hated to sting him like that, but I needed the money. Later on he got up against it and sold the play to somebody else, who sold it to another guy, who sold it to Percy Wainwright and that's how P. W. came to be an author. Maybe you've noticed he hasn't written anything since. He won't until some other poor devil of a hack writes it first."

"Nevertheless," insisted Peter, "posing as the author was dishonest."

"Son," observed Birmingham, sententiously, "when you go home and you find some mud on the bottom of your pants and you scrape it off, I bet your conscience

hurts you because you can't just remember where it came from, so you could go and put it right back. I recall that I said once I didn't know where you stole the idea of 'B. C.' from and you flared up. I'll take my solemn oath, now, that you not only didn't lift it, but tried your darndest to use words that had never been connected together on paper before, for fear of plagiarizing unconsciously from somebody."

Peter flushed. He felt a sense of terrible injustice done to his friend.

"Didn't it make your blood boil that this pretender was coining all sorts of big money out of your original property? I suppose the beggar did make a lot?"

"I saw where the movie rights sold for $80,000 one day. No, I felt that the joke was on me and that other poor guy that paid me five hundred and passed on a fortune. You see, I got half a season's work out of it and some extra money besides. I had no kick coming. It's the way of the world."

"But why didn't you write another play?" asked Peter, puzzled.

The stage director toyed with his empty glass (they were seated in the back room of the Dutchman's and the glass had contained lemon and seltzer) until Peter began to fear he had offended him. He was, however, merely arranging his explanation.

"You see," he said at last, "when a guy finds that he has a genius for drinkin' liquor and perfects it, he hasn't much time to waste writin' scripts, or doin' anything else that interferes with his main aim in life. If Gawd is good to me and my nerve holds out I've had my last bun, but I'm fifty-six years old and my mind is on what I've done to my kidneys more than it is on what I'm goin' to do with the lil' time that's left me. I've passed

the age of youthful ambish, Son, but I'll tell you one thing: You go on and make your mark; get to where you deserve to be and I'll be satisfied. I'll say to myself, 'you're the one who started him. He hadn't ever tried to write a play until you put the notion into his English nut. You're the miner that had the luck to dig that nugget out of the earth.' That's what I'll say, Son, and I'll be just as happy and a damn sight happier than if I'd made the grade myself."

Peter felt emotionally stirred. Here was a pure, unselfish brotherly love that shone and sparkled like a crown of diamonds. He felt a deeper awe, even, than when he had first beheld the beloved land of his adoption. He yearned to tell Birmingham how tremendously he appreciated his affectionate interest. He searched his soul for the appropriate words.

"Thanks, Old Chap," said Peter.

CHAPTER XI.

PETER ACQUIRES A REGULAR SECRETARY AND REDEEMS A PROMISE.

BACK stage at the Community Playhouse, Helen's affairs became the topic of the hour. Her forthcoming departure from the ranks, a tacitly accepted understanding that she was about to become the sweetheart of the great Arthur Baildon and her interesting efforts to reduce herself and become "fit," as she termed it, supplied ample material for gossip. And they all rather pitied the forsaken Peter.

Marguerite could not help noticing Peter's new air of quiet elation, dating from that evening when Helen had moistily called it all off. Peter attributed his air to the eminently satisfactory interview with Ben Straus, but Marguerite guessed that the abandonment of Helen's pursuit had something to do with it. She regretfully classified him as an incorrigible bachelor and metaphorically tucked away her own hopes in lavender.

Gradually there percolated into Peter's conscience the disturbing fact that the days were passing and nothing had been done about making a start on the new play. He seemed intellectually paralyzed. He shamefully sidestepped concentration on the important subject, but sometimes he would wake with a start in the small hours with a flash of realization that he was avoiding his definite responsibilities. Spring was approaching and he

noted that his disinclination to buckle down to the play extended to a distaste for his work in the office. Again he took stock. He was fearfully well fixed. Peter suddenly decided to chuck the Guardian billet. This decision he communicated to Marguerite.

"I think," he said, "that I'll run off and hide somewhere for a fortnight and then come back with my lungs full of fresh air and tackle the Straus thing in dead earnest. If you'll chuck your job, too——"

He hesitated. Marguerite flushed and thrilled at the thought that perhaps he was going to suggest that she join him in his hiding. She hoped desperately that he wouldn't, because it would cheapen him, and hoped that he would, because—well—because. Of course, she wouldn't, but——

"If you'll chuck your job, too," Peter was saying, "I can afford when I return to take you on at your present salary until the play is finished and very likely I shall want you to keep right on as a—well, secretary, what?"

He looked at her with honest, twinkling eyes, full of his new idea, and Marguerite agreed that it would be corking.

So Peter made inquiries and collected folders and went about things with British thoroughness, to the end that he chose a spot up in the Catskills in which to take his lungfull of fresh air. He was to leave the following Monday. His resignation had been accepted with what he considered to be almost uncomplimentary serenity by the Guardian. Then, on Friday morning, Marguerite exploded a bombshell.

"We were gossiping in the dressing room last night," she observed casually, "and I was telling about your leaving Monday, when Sadie Greenbaum woke up and said something about your having promised on your

sacred word of honor to write her a play for the next bill."

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Peter, suddenly remembering. "The bill that's on now will be through in another month, they say. Business is dropping, though, goodness knows, there's no kick coming. We've kept it on nearly all winter. But Crane and Levanski have their heads together every evening and signs point to something stirring."

"I've booked a room at the Rip Van Winkle Inn from Monday," said Peter, "and I'm morally bound to pay for it from Monday. Still, a promise is a promise. Certainly, I consoled Sadie for her disappointment by telling her I'd write a piece for her, and, by Jingo, she'll have to have it."

"I think," said Marguerite, slowly, "that Crane is trying to keep you out of the next bill. He's as jealous as a girl and Levanski doesn't seem to love you so much, either, since you made him come through with real money. But I'm on the play committee, myself, and I'll do my d—darndest (I didn't say it!) to help you."

Profanity from feminine lips was anathema to Peter, and Marguerite had been keen enough to perceive what she called his "fussiness."

Peter characteristically took the bull by the horns. He visited the stuffy little box office that evening and explained to Levanski in detail his promise to Sadie Greenbaum. And while he explained, a great light of opportunity broke in on the business manager.

"Well, of course," admitted Levanski, "I wouldn't deny that your little play helped us get on earth, although we were anyhow due to put ourselves across, but your little play helped and so did the article which you put in the paper. I ain't denying we owe you something for

the boost and we would be glad to consider another little play. Since you ain't going to be on the Guardian any more there's that to be considered, too, and I give it to you straight," said Mr. Levanski, with the light of bargaining in his shrewd eyes, "that there wouldn't be any ten dollars a show in the next one."

Levanski held an advantage. Peter was committed by a promise and a promise to Peter was strangely and inexplicably to Levanski something tangible, to be carried out, and not an airy trifle to be avoided at convenience. The next play, therefore, was in the nature of a necessity for Peter and Mr. Levanski intended to take full advantage of that necessity to secure a cut-rate.

Helen had departed from the Village group and Sadie was now regularly playing the parts she had formerly understudied. Peter sought her out, back stage, and outlined to her a swiftly conjured idea for her approval. It permitted legs and Sadie was strong for legs. She said the idea was simply gorgeous, as well as high-brow, only she had always understood that a siren was a big whistle.

Peter gathered up Marguerite after this Friday evening performance and conveyed her in a taxi to his uptown apartment, where for three hours they earnestly conferred. He dictated roughly the dialogue of a playlet. It was laid in the time of Caesar Tiberius and the setting was the Blue Grotto of Capri. Sadie was a Greek dancing girl caught bathing in the grotto by Tiberius, whose superstitious credulity identified her as a siren. She, on the other hand, took him to be a stray god. The title was "The Siren and Caesar."

It was 3 o'clock when they finished, a scandalous hour for a young man and young woman to be alone in an apartment, but this feature did not appear to occur to Peter. He scurried out and located a night-prowling

taxi some blocks away. Into the taxi he helped Marguerite with the air of a Sir Walter Raleigh squiring a Queen Elizabeth.

"I wouldn't have him any other way," she thought, huddled in a corner of the car, "but the devil of it is, it makes me love him all the more!"

Peter got away on Monday, after all. He left the script with Marguerite to submit to the committee, with full authority to make what terms she could for its presentation. She was disappointingly "easy" for Mr. Levanski, who quickly snapped up her naive suggestion that the piece be accepted without royalty for free performance until its value had been demonstrated.

"It would be like taking candy from a baby," thought Mr. Levanski.

"If the play gets over, God help you," thought Marguerite.

CHAPTER XII.

PETER MAKES AN OMELETTE AND GETS DOWN TO BRASS TACKS.

PETER returned bronzed and as hard as nails. As a fish takes to water, an Englishman takes to walking and he found the roads through the Catskills to be quite to his taste. Often alone, but sometimes with a dour Scot whom he met at the inn, he swung along for reckless miles and then trudged back again, aglow with spiritual virility and with pleasant aches in his calves and knee-joints. The weather was perfect and his walking boots were comfortable. He ate ravenously and slept like a merry old top. Walking stimulates the processes of thinking and on those jaunts which happened to be solitary he worked up a practicable theme for his play. Even when the Scot was along he made progress, for his companion was as prudent with conversation as he was with tips.

"Varra gude," Mr. MacGreggor might grunt as they paused to drink in some lovely vista at the summit of a hill. "A braw scramble," he might concede at the conclusion of their tramp. The rest was companionable silence.

Marguerite was to quit her position on the Saturday preceding the return of Peter. This she did and she glowed at the sound of his voice over the telephone at 9 o'clock Monday morning. He invited her up to his diggings, where she appeared an hour later, radiant and, oh, so glad to see him.

Peter beamed on her and his grip of her hand made her wince slightly with a pain that was half-pleasure.

"I've had in a typewriting machine," he crowed in greeting. "Regular thing, stand, office chair and all. Quite ripping. Thought of it all by myself."

There it was, in the living room close to the window. Peter was for starting to work instanter, but she pleaded for time to look him over and hear about his vacation. Thus an hour was passed. Then her pencil needed to be sharpened and this was a man's job.

"I saw a device the other day for sharpening pencils, quite as one would grind coffee," said Peter. "I'll have one in. Great little implement. Ingenious race, we Americans, what?"

He outlined the results of his brooding afoot. These she approved with reservations and the reservations had to be discussed. It got to be lunch time and he asked how she would like to have luncheon there. He could make a perfectly corking omelette. It was his specialty. It fortunately happened that she was just dying for a really expert omelette and Peter got elaborately busy. Everything had to be exactly so, or the trick wouldn't work. He revelled in the delicate intricacies of his operations, begging her to watch him closely that she might see how it was done.

She watched him closely! She devoured him with her eyes.

The omelette was accomplished; tea was brewed and toast was made. She tasted the omelette. Perfectly wonderful!

"No!" cried Peter, glowing with pride. "Really?"

"Oh, ab-solutely," replied Marguerite. She was getting to use his expressions. He looked at her to see if she weren't spoofing. The expression he caught in her

eyes vaguely disturbed him and he sobered at once. She dropped her eyelids, feeling self-conscious.

After luncheon they had to wash up, of course. Peter insisted on washing the dishes while she did the wiping. It didn't matter if he got hangnails, he explained. How considerate and thoughtful he was, she thought dreamily, wiping a platter. Then they returned to the business of the play.

At 5 o'clock he declared that he was quite done in. She obediently laid down her notebook and pencil and waited his further suggestions. Her hands were idle in her lap and she was studying the pattern of the rug. Peter gave her an uneasy glance. He wondered if she expected him to ask her to dinner and decided he'd better not.

"I—I shall have to see a man," he said, flushing over the atrocious lie, "so I'm afraid I won't have the pleasure again until tomorrow. Shall we say 10 o'clock?"

She crossed the room to get her wrap. He sprang to help her with it.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," she said. "Birmy asked me Saturday to say to you that he wanted to have a pow with you about the new one-act script. He's afraid Sadie can't get away with it."

"I'll drop around tonight," frowned Peter. "She's *got* to get away with it! Why—I wrote it all for her."

"Then," said Marguerite demurely, raising her eyes to his, "I *may* see you this evening, after all?"

"Possibly," he replied shortly. "It all depends."

That disturbing look of hers which he had caught at lunch time still troubled him and Marguerite knew it.

"Pull yourself together, you damn fool!" she muttered as she trudged toward the subway station, censorship being reserved for those hours when she was in Peter's company. "That goo-goo look of yours scared the poor

darling silly. He doesn't want you! He doesn't want *any* woman. He's crazy with relief over his escape from Helen. He's an adorable prude, a fascinating Puritan. God! What a husband he would make!"

At a solitary dinner uptown Peter managed to shake off a sense of impending doom. He took himself mentally to task for his insufferable egotism.

"You're gun-shy, you poor fish," he informed himself. "It's all your bally imagination. She likes you, probably, though she's precious little reason to; but she's not trying to hook you. Far be it! Why get into a stew about a far-away look in her eyes? It was the omelette she was thinking of, no doubt. Corking good omelette, if I do say so, myself. Girls are like that. A tid-bit will make 'em look spoony a jolly sight faster than a man will. Come out of it, Old Top; you don't care much for yourself, do you?"

He dropped in at the theater around 9 o'clock. Birmingham, who had heard from Marguerite, was waiting for him in the lobby.

"Well—well—well! Look who's here!" he boomed, sweeping him with an all-embracing glance. "Fine as a fiddle! Ready right now to fight Jack Johnson! Regular white hope! Darned glad to see you, Son."

They adjourned to the Dutchman's. Peter demanded to know what was the matter with Sadie Greenbaum and the Siren show.

"Nothing much," grinned Birmingham, "only you've given the lil' lady a bigger mouthful than she can chew; one of those Fay Bainter parts and Sadie's as close to being a Fay Bainter as a hunk of cheese is to bein' a diamond. You ought to have known better."

"What's to be done?" asked Peter, discouraged.

"Cut down the part to fit Sadie," grunted Birmingham.

"Keep in all your nice, actor-proof high lights, but simplify it. The handful you handed to Tiberius ain't such easy-as-pie stuff, either. You must have had Holbrook Blinn in mind, or Otis Skinner."

"I can't rewrite the play," declared Peter. "I'm in the midst of the piece I'm doing for Straus. I can't be diverted like that or I'll go to smash. If Greenbaum can't play it, it's her lookout. I've done my part."

Birmingham stared as at a stranger. Peter flushed.

"No, hang it," he admitted, "that's not fair. Still, the part seems straight and simple enough to me. But I've never seen the little devil work; how was I to know?

"Tell you what!" said Peter, "YOU fix it! That's a good chap."

Birmingham's stare widened to take in a whole group of strangers.

"Would you trust ME to hack that pretty lil' gem to pieces?" he asked, incredulously.

"Why not? Didn't you write 'The Long Arm'? Why, Man, it's my highest ambition to produce a play as good as that. No doubt you can vastly improve it, if you put your mind and talents to it. The Siren isn't so good it couldn't be better."

"There's hope for you yet, Son," mused Birmingham. "Most authors yelp bloody murder if you try to change a comma of their masterpieces; most authors and all young ones, present company excepted. All right; I'll take the job."

"That's that," said Peter. "And I'll split the royalties and take you on as collab with your name on the programme."

"Wait!" moaned Birmingham. "Don't kill me altogether. Knock me out and flabbergast me, but remember I want to live! If the Authors' Union heard what you

spilled just now, they'd excommunicate you and boil you in oil. Be generous, if you must, Peter, but stay human!"

He flatly declined any share in the royalty or in the credit. He declared that all he would do was to simplify a scene or two to bring the piece into the circle of Sadie's abilities.

"How about that Tiberius guy?" he demanded. "Who do you figure I'm going to cast for that part?"

"Oh, I don't care," replied Peter, carelessly, "cast yourself."

Birmingham started.

"How did you know I was beginnin' to have an itch to play that juicy part?" he asked, mystified.

"Were you? I didn't suspect." Peter looked a bit doubtful. Birmingham noted the look.

"Afraid of me?" he asked, meekly. "Afraid your Uncle will queer the part with his sloppy diction? Don't let that worry you, Son. It's a bad habit I don't carry into a scene with me. Listen here:"

Birmingham recited Tiberius' longest and most eloquent speech with a cultivated, tripping delivery that would have done credit to a Forbes-Robertson. Peter looked his pleased astonishment.

"Jut part of the lil' box of tricks," explained the veteran. "Us good actors do their actin' on the stage. Go on, dare me to play Tiberius!"

"I—I double-dare you!" cried Peter. "You'll be ripping, no less."

They rose to depart.

"Going back stage?" asked Birmingham, as they emerged into the squalid street. Peter thought not. "That's so," commented the director, with a grin, "Birdie isn't there any more. Flown to rarer heights. Gosh,

what a hole she's left in our lil' group of earnest workers! If you'd seen Sadie Greenbaum tryin' to fill the vacancy, you might have gone slow on that Siren thing. All she brings to your mother in B. C. is her legs. When she mourns the dear departed you'd think she'd just found her chewing gum was missing, she's that intense. Oh, well, they only make Helens once in ten years, so what can you expect? Good night, Son. Much obliged for lettin' me throw my hooks into the Siren piece and play that Emperor. I'll try not to muss him up for you and maybe I can hold up Sadie a lil' bit."

CHAPTER XIII.

OBSTACLES APPEAR IN PETER'S PATH AND HE MAKES A SPEECH.

FOR several weeks work on the new play went on swimmingly. Two of the three acts had been typed on yellow paper and set aside for further revision and a good start had been made on the last act. Then Peter received a salmon-colored note from the Ben Straus offices asking him to call on their general stage director, Mr. Dan De Freece, in re the proposed play he was to submit. Peter left Marguerite to catch up with her typing and took a taxi to the Ben Straus offices. He had acquired the taxi habit.

Mr. De Freece proved to be a large gentleman with scant tangled hair and dreamy blue eyes, which appeared to be seeing that which was beyond the vision of common mortals. He greeted Peter wearily, struggled to gather his thoughts out of remote spaces, smiled deprecatingly as one whose mind is roguishly occupied with the larger aspects of the universe and finally managed to bring himself down to earth.

"This play," he sighed, with a vague gesture, "This play of yours, you know. Have you started it?"

"Nearly finished it," replied Peter, proudly.

"Anything in it to fit——" Here Mr. De Freece slipped a cable and soared to heights. He murmured "tut-tut," took himself in hand and returned to the here and now.

"Anything in it to fit Marie Durand?" he achieved in one uninterrupted sentence.

Peter regretted being compelled to admit that he had never seen Marie Durand. The information depressed the general stage director, who very nearly slipped his cable again. He turned a reproachful, unseeing gaze on him and sighed. The sigh intimated that Mr. De Freece ought to be attending to the convolutions of Jupiter and not juggling with trifles. He pondered deeply for so long that Peter grew uneasy.

"She is over at the Nestor," explained Mr. De Freece, patiently, as to a child. "Small part in 'The Way of Women.' Only on in two acts, but the piece is all hers while she *is* on. Very promising. You should see her. You should see them all. She is to be with us next—ah——"

He was off again, like a medium in a trance, seeing things that were invisible, but once more he won the struggle.

"What was I saying? She is with us next season. Featured, not starred. It would be nice if your play should fit her."

He favored Peter with a bland look as one who was conferring a strictly confidential and highly important piece of inside information.

So Peter went to the Nestor to see Marie Durand and "The Way of Women." He chose a matinee, so that his secretary could be with him, Marguerite still being engaged evenings at the Community Theater. They decided that Miss Durand was a winsome bit of fluff. The description was Peter's. Unhappily, however, there was nothing for her in the new play and nothing that could be built up to fit her. He was worried. Reading between the lines, as it were, Mr. De Freece had imparted what

amounted to an ultimatum. There was no way out of it.

"If they want a play for Durand," mused Marguerite, after the matinee, "the thing to do is to take advantage of your inside information and write a play for Durand."

"But," protested Peter, "how about 'The Fifth Wheel?'" This was his tentative title for the play upon which they had been working.

"Let somebody else produce it or let Dave Straus have it for some other star," decided Marguerite. "We mustn't pass up a tip like the one De Freece gave you. What we want to do is to get busy right away on a Marie Durand play. She's sure to make a personal hit, the sweet little thing, and think how much that means for an author."

"The Fifth Wheel" was laid aside and the following morning they discussed the pros and cons of an entirely different piece. Peter approached the undertaking with a feeling of hopeless despair, but Marguerite bolstered his failing courage and finally they hit upon an idea and worked diligently to develop it. Peter began to feel that it was better than "The Fifth Wheel." He had no lazy bone in his body nor had Marguerite in hers. To be within range of his personality and the sound of his voice was a delight and her days of toil were golden days if only Peter were in the room. She hoped against her clear-headed reason that what she felt might eventually be communicated to his own bosom, there to sprout and bloom. But it seemed a remote and unpromising possibility.

The thread of the Durand Play, as they called it, now progressing famously, was broken by a Sunday night dress rehearsal and Monday night opening of the new bill at the Community Playhouse, of which new bill "The Siren and Caesar" was a unit. A new man in the Vil-

lage, an artist, handicapped by the prosaic name of Crump, had attempted the Blue Grotto setting and when Peter caught his first sight of it as the buckram curtains parted, he gasped. Crump had achieved a fairyland in canvas and Birmingham had provided marvelous light for it.

Marguerite, at his side, whispered that it was too good; that it would distract the audience from the play itself. Peter hoped not.

The action started. Sadie Greenbaum, very fetching in a clinging rose-pink suit of short tights of a kind called "Annette Kellermans," popped out of the blue water, glistening with witch-hazel, so compounded as to evaporate readily. She listened to off-stage murmurings and disappeared again over a rocky run into the "sea." Tiberius and his minister, Sejanus, came down hewn steps from above. The piece was on.

Birmingham, transformed into a very human Roman Emperor, brought authority and poise that warmed Peter's soul. He was a new Birmingham, purged of his uncouth mannerisms and his homely, awkward atmosphere, and quite unconsciously imperial in his bearing, as if he had been born to it. When he spoke his voice had a soothing quality and his accents were crystal in their clarity. For a minute or two the dialogue struck familiarly on Peter's ears; then a new note was struck. That was not his line. He remembered that Birmingham had received authority to fix the script. He gave close attention. A slice of Peter, a slice of Birmingham, a cut of a speech or so, a ripping down of sentences to their essentials.

Marguerite gave a startled glance at her employer, who did not notice it in his absorption. Birmingham certainly had taken liberties. There were broken frag-

ments of speech, such as Peter would never have set down; fragments which conveyed the meaning of the whole and which, now that they were articulated, gave spontaneity to the dialogue. At one radical departure Birmingham, catching Peter's startled eye, favored him with a wink, for this was but a dress rehearsal. At that it was quite an imperial wink, in keeping with the character.

Little Sadie Greenbaum was not doing badly, although she seemed to fear Birmingham more than she feared the august Tiberius and kept an eye on him as a performing animal watches the trainer. The tag was spoken and the buckram curtains shut out the Caprean fairyland. A moment later Birmingham, still in royal purple, had come through the side door and approached Peter, his sheepish grin incongruously shining through the Tiberius make-up.

"Well, Son?" he said with very non-imperial meekness, "did I slash the lil' gem so it hurt?"

"You improved it wonderfully! Gave it just what it needed!" cried Peter. "And you made that old rascal live, by Jove. Why did you ever leave the stage?"

"The stage sort of up and left me, Son," mumbled the veteran. He was all Birmingham now, except the royal apparel.

Marguerite offered her congratulations and declared she would never again resent Birmy's criticism of her mistakes.

"I can see now that you never ask anybody to do what you can't do yourself and do better than they can," she said in apology for past fits of mutiny. "You're one grand actor, Birmy, and I'll never tell you your business any more."

Peter became aware of a new presence. Mr. Dan De

Freece interposed his impressive form. Birmingham extended a bare right arm.

"Hello, Dan!" he cried, "found your way down here at last, huh?"

"You know Mr. De Freece?" asked Peter, ceremoniously.

"Birmingham knows everybody in the profession," sighed De Freece. "How are you, Birmy? Who painted your scenery? Crump? He's got the makings. Send him up to our offices. Neat little play our Mr. Millard gave you."

He turned to Peter.

"Clever idea," he murmured, blinking, "and your technic is vastly improved over the cave-man trifle, vastly. You've caught the artistic beauty of simplicity. Wonderful element, simplicity—ah——"

Off again. Trouble in Venus, perhaps.

Peter was about to proclaim that this new simplicity was none of his own gift, but Birmingham stopped him with another wink and a shake of the head. De Freece gradually returned to earth.

"Your direction, Birmy? Excellent. Caught the atmosphere. Nice performance you gave, too. Too bad your girl was so rotten. Crump, did you say the name was? My God, what a name for an artist. Send him up to our offices if it isn't stealing him. He has the makings——"

Peter, feeling himself in the way, joined Marguerite, who had discreetly retired on the appearance of Ben Straus' general stage director.

"Interesting boy, Millard," murmured De Freece, watching him go. "Where did you find him? He has the makings."

"You bet your sweet lil' life he has the makin'!" re-

plied Birmingham, belligerently. "He's goin' to write some of your pet authors right off the map of lil' old Broadway."

"Nice girl he's with," sighed De Freece, appraisingly. "Holds herself well. Glorious hair. One of your—ah—artists?"

"Not in this bill," replied Birmingham. "You caught her in Peter's other play."

"Ah, to be sure," murmured De Freece, preparing to leave. "No, I won't remain for the rest—she played the lead. Yes, yes—nice legs. Good night."

"Lil' old Broadway," as Birmingham called it, had a more or less promising opening on Monday evening, but the newspapers sent their second-string men down to the Village. Second-string critics are in a ticklish position. It is essential that they should score a fair average of accurate guesses if they are to develop into first-string. They are wary, therefore, of too-definite judgment. Unless a production is manifestly hopeless, or as manifestly triumphant, they are inclined to steer a safe middle course and burn up space in glittering generalities. Past performances are important to them as guides.

Now, Peter's past performance was distinctly creditable, so they took a reckless chance with "The Siren and Caesar" and pronounced it good. Mr. Crane, not having notoriously scored any bullseyes, got the glittering generalities as his portion and it made him squirm. Crane's contribution to the new bill, "got by," as Birmingham grudgingly admitted, but not much more.

Mr. Crane had cherished a secret admiration for Helen Robbins' ample charms and considered himself to be in a fair way to achieving his meretricious ambition, when Peter happened to catch her fancy. Peter, as a newspaper man, exercised a sordid influence, too potent for

mere dramatic genius, such as Mr. Crane's, to overcome. So Peter had (presumably) attained to Helen's charms and by a purely lucky stroke had stumbled into a contemptibly popular hit at the same time.

The cordial relations manifested in the famous De Freece's greeting of Peter that Sunday evening had not been lost on Crane. The lucky stiff! Prostituting himself to material ends, currying favor with commercialized interests. Disgusting. Why had he come down to the Village, anyway? He did not belong in that rare atmosphere of art for art's sake. He was a money-grubber, a panderer to the bourgeoisie. Let him stick in his own neck of the woods, on garish and vulgar Broadway. And he had perverted Helen. She had scored a "popular" success in Millard's pish-posh. (He forgot the equally popular success she had scored in his own classic.) He felt decidedly like giving Millard a good thrashing, only he wore glasses and the lucky stiff was bigger than he.

Tuesday's reviews gave Mr. Crane a bilious attack. There it was again! The venal kept press threw fits for the writer of pish-posh and damned him, Crane, with faint praise. What was the use?

During the days that followed there crept into the theatrical columns of the dailies little paragraphs concerning Mr. Millard. Mr. Millard was doing this, he was doing that. The author of "Very Much B. C." and "The Siren and Cæsar," had been invited to address the Women's Stage Uplift Society. What did he know about uplift? Bah. Crane was the apostle of the really worthwhile. Why didn't they ask him? Rotten politics, bootlicking, organized favor-seeking.

Mr. Crane was no more astonished than Peter himself at this campaign of publicity. Out of a clear sky Peter received, through the Straus offices, the summons

to appear before the lady stage uplifters. Mr. Straus timidly suggested that Peter owed it to himself and to his associates to seize every possible angle to further his own cause.

"We had quite a time to get the invitation," confessed Straus. "There are women from all over the East going to meet. It will do you good. It will help the play, you know. They'll talk about you when they get back home. You should think twice before you would refuse."

For Peter had balked. The bare idea of standing up before a pack of women who wanted to uplift the stage threw him into a panic. What was there to uplift? The stage was all right. No indeed, he couldn't possibly. He would be certain to flop. Mr. Straus did not insist; it was not his way. He had a better one; Mr. De Freece was put on the trail and Peter was summoned into the Presence.

De Freece came out of a dream apparently unrefreshed.

"What is this about your declining to address the—ah—hen convention?" he demanded, wearily. Peter repeated the objections he had made to Straus. Among them was the little detail that he didn't know what on earth to talk about. Mr. De Freece was amused in his dreary way.

"You *can* make a speech, you know. This—ah—Birmingham told me so. Said you make a corking talk to his little group, once.

So, Birmingham had been blabbing.

"As for a subject—" De Freece held an aching head and sighed. "Don't make me smile. There are millions of subjects; look within yourself."

Peter did not know how that was to be managed.

"Take the Siren trifle. You have Tiberius speaking

like a common, every day modern mortal. To be sure Shaw did the same trick in 'Cæsar and Cleopatra.' There's your subject: 'The Dramatic Value of the Incongruous in Tradition.' I'd write it for you, myself, but I've a thousand things to do——"

Bare contemplation of the thousand things set him off into space. The agony passed.

"Or take your cave-man trifle. 'Indecent Suggestion of Tights as Applied to the Undraped.' You could get a full column in every paper in town with that; as a newspaper man you know it. You owe it to yourself and to us. Gratitude, Man!—appreciation—honor——"

Accidentally he had hit upon the hypnotic word. If it was a matter of honor, why, there was nothing for it but to make the proposed address. Peter sighed and surrendered. He invested in a cutaway frock coat and spats and proceeded to enlighten the Women's Stage Uplift Society as per invitation.

On the whole Peter rather enjoyed that experience. For one thing, it was broadening; it gave him opportunity for the study of characters. Take Mrs. Mangrove Sinnolt, who presided. Certainly she was a character. She weighed two hundred pounds and had a baby voice; she played the part of a wistful, helpless little thing beautifully, if she did not look it. She was *so* pleased to meet Mr. —— was it *MILL*ard, or Mill*ARD?* The Society felt *so* honored, really. The ladies were quite set up. Was Mr. *Mill*ard from Baltimer, by any chance? She had passed her childhood in Baltimer yahs and yahs ago. She paused, confused, to permit Peter to protest that it could not truly have been yahs and yahs ago and Peter did what was expected of him. She favored him with a shy, melting look and murmured, "Oh you Men."

She only asked because Mr. Millard's speech was—well—so correct, and she had heard that Baltimoreans spoke the most perfect English in Amurica.

The subject of his address, now; all the ladies were on the kervive. They were afraid it was going to be just a little—well, just a little ootray. No? But the title of it, "False Modesty as Applied to Stage Apparel," did not that tend to—well—indicate that it would be just a little—well, frank? She hoped that she was Broad. Peter, viewing the expanse of bosom thought to himself that it was more than a hope. Breadth was what Art needed; didn't he think so? Oh, absolutely Peter thought so.

There was a Committee. They fluttered and simpered and some of them flirted and all of them surrounded him and begged to be presented by Madam President. One of the Committee hoped that Mr. Millard would regard the audience as simply an Audience and not just women. It was so unfair to regard them as just women; it restricted one so. Many gentlemen who had addressed them had modified the scope of their subjects quite unnecessarily. She hoped he would modify nothing. A coy gleam accompanied the hope. Primness and intellect were things apart and should not be confused.

Peter gathered that they rather expected him to shock them.

Madame President, Mrs. Mangrove Sinnolt, called the meeting to order and bade fair to take up most of Peter's allotted time in introducing him. Her baby voice carried surprisingly well. She reminded her hearers that they were about to hear words of wisdom from one of the Younger School of Uplifters. She hoped that the lecturer would include in his remarks references to the present demoralizing tendency toward the dooble-dentender,

or double meaning. She hoped she made herself clear. She dilated exhaustively on what she meant and that reminded her of the decadent tendency to frivolity so marked in present-day stage offerings. What she meant by that was—and she explained fully what she meant by that.

Finally, when Peter had begun to believe that Mrs. Mangrove Sinnolt would relieve him of the necessity of making any address at all, she launched on her fifth peroration, turned her bulk on him and with a smile that would have graced a little girl of ten, declared that it was her privilege and her honor to present the speaker of the afternoon, Mr. Peter Fillimore Mill*ARD*—no —*MILL*ard.

Peter had rehearsed with Marguerite a fluidly written essay which he had half learned by heart. His opening was letter-perfect and at that point where he hoped to receive his first applause, sure enough, he received applause. This so increased his self-confidence that he soon began to discard the more formal words he had written in favor of extemporary expression. He felt so gorgeously at his ease that he dared to look his hearers over, individually, instead of fixing his eyes glassily on a distant point just over the last row. He noted powdered noses and irregular eyebrows; he noted strained expressions of deliberate and tense intellectuality, assumed for his benefit, but most of all he noted a unanimity of genuine attention that was comforting.

He tried a mischievous experiment. One point reminded him of a story—but, no—on second thought, he had better not tell the story. There were murmurs of "Oh, please do——" "Go on——" and words of similar pleading import. As a matter of fact Peter had no story, it was a bit of teasing. So he stammered that later on,

perhaps,—and changed the subject. He became chatty and informative. A glance at his watch on the table showed him he had consumed an hour which, in all conscience, was quite enough. So he launched into a prepared peroration which did not fit what had just gone before and wound up in a blaze of crisp oratory.

Muffled applause from gloved hands rewarded him, not loud, but sustained and general. Madam President took the stage, rapped for attention and suggested that a vote of thanks might not be amiss. The vote of thanks was achieved smartly in the most approved parliamentary manner and Peter smiled gratefully from where he sat. Mrs. Mangrove Sinnolt, rubbing in a good thing, then cooed that although no arrangement had been made to that effect, she felt sure that Mr. Millard would consent to remain among them for a space so that those of the audience who had so hugely enjoyed his illuminating discourse might tell him so in person.

The gathering broke up and Peter became fair game for any who chose to address him, formalities of introduction having been waived. Many of them spoke to him and most of them wanted to know, confidentially, what *was* that story? One gentle creature, itching with an unbearable curiosity, slipped her address on a card into his hand and suggested in a whisper that he write it to her. After half an hour of lion-baiting he escaped, wilted, but exultant. There had been some reporters. He hoped he hadn't made a silly ass of himself, but anyway, that was that.

In the course of a week Peter received, through the agency of the Straus offices, three or four "mash notes" from impressionable members of the Women's Stage Uplift Society. Never in his life had he left a letter of any sort unanswered. Peter got Marguerite to reply to these

notes in her capacity of confidential secretary and in her own hand. Her replies did not encourage further correspondence.

The new bill at the Community Playhouse was running prosperously and Mr. Levanski dodged whenever he saw Peter looming. The longer an agreement was postponed in the matter of royalties, the longer would "The Siren and Caesar" continue to be free of expense to the treasury. It was now spring, but the weather continued chilly. The fame of the little playhouse had become firmly established. A rearrangement of seats had slightly increased the capacity and this was being tested right along.

Peter spoke to Marguerite about the royalty.

"I'll get it for you," she replied, grimly. "Our business is two-hundred a week bigger now than when the old bill went off. Shows that Helen wasn't the only drawing card we had." She could not help flinging this in for good measure.

"Peter has given me full authority to handle his business with you," she informed Levanski that evening and Levanski smiled a sick smile.

"Well," he whined, "we ain't on our feet yet, what with expenses for new scenery and costumes and everything, but I suppose we could pay him five dollars a show."

"I suppose you could and be tickled stiff at the chance," she snapped. "But I happen to see the box-office statement every night."

"Six-fifty or he could have back his play."

"I'll write an item for the papers announcing it comes off Saturday," she agreed, enthusiastically. "That will give you five days to get another piece ready."

Mr. Levanski did not appear to share her enthusiasm.

"In five days we could do nothink," he wailed. "In a

month maybe yes. We got plenty good scripts but it would need we should rehearse them." When Levanski became agitated his English suffered. Marguerite, in the highest good humor, shook her head mischievously.

"Oh, Moe! a whole month more free of royalty? I got to hand it to you; you certainly are a faithful little watch-dog of the treasury. You've had the piece now for three weeks plus. A week from next Saturday it comes off. That's final."

"How much?" whispered Levanski, breathing hard.

"Fifteen dollars a performance."

"Oi gevalt!" he moaned. "She would ruin us because she has it a smesh on the author!"

Marguerite's hazel-green eyes narrowed dangerously. Her good humor vanished with distinctly disturbing suddenness.

"You little Rat!" she exclaimed. "You get personal and I'll slap your dirty face and take the piece away to-morrow. You haven't any contract; you haven't a leg to stand on. You know just as well as I do that it's the Siren show that's pulling them, just as B.C. pulled 'em all winter. You know that Peter Millard put us on earth. We're all of us getting fat on him, from Birmy down to you and including me."

Levanski made signals of distress.

"Twelve-fifty," said Levanski.

"I'm through," replied Marguerite, and turned away. Levanski surrendered, just as she had known he would.

"Beginning next Monday and until further notice," she told Peter the following morning, "Mr. Author's royalty for 'The Siren and Caesar' will be fifteen round dollars for each and every performance payable weekly at the box-office and you ought to have seen Moe Levanski when I broke the news to him."

"By George!" said Peter. "That's thirty a week more than I got for the B.C. piece!"

"I'm trying to earn my salary for my new boss. God knows he needs a business manager."

"I say," said Peter, "that will be like taking money from you. I can't do that. I shall have to give you a rise."

"A what?"

"A raise," amended Peter. "Henceforth your salary is thirty."

"Accepted with thanks," said Marguerite, demurely.

CHAPTER XIV.

PETER ENCOUNTERS FURTHER OBSTACLES AND MARGUERITE MAKES AN OMELETTE.

KINDLY drop in at your earliest convenience. Important." Thus read a salmon colored note from De Freece which Peter found in his mail, one bright spring morning. He felt that it foretold trouble. He kindly dropped in and learned to his dismay that his premonition was accurate.

"That play," murmured the general stage director, "you know, that play you are doing for us. Anything in it for Tom Colt?"

"I've been writing it with Marie Durand in view," replied Peter, faintly.

"She's not to be with us. Going to marry and retire. We shall want a vehicle for Tom Colt. Sorry to put you to extra trouble, but you know how women are. We shall bother with no more women stars. That's absolute; we've done with them. Did you get far with the Durand piece?

"Only up to the middle of the last act," replied Peter, bitterly. "See here, Mr. De Freece: I have six weeks left of the six months period. I started a play on my own lines and got it practically finished when you sidetracked me. Then I started another play for Marie Durand at your express desire and I'm jolly well into that one, when you topple the whole blessed thing over again and my

work is wasted. According to agreement I am ready to submit a play to you— 'The Fifth Wheel'——"

"It does not fit our plan," murmured Mr. De Freece. "Good comedy probably, but not for us."

"But I have done my part," insisted Peter. "I am practically ready to submit a second piece, but you keep changing your plans so that a chap cannot keep up with you. Permit me, therefore, to return your fifty dollars and bid you a very good morning."

He produced the sum named from his wallet and laid the bills on the desk. Mr. De Freece looked at them as if they were banana peelings, annoyingly thrust upon him.

"Don't be rash—don't be insane—don't be temperamental," he complained. His patience was beautiful to behold. He resisted all temptation to wander off into the cosmos and laid before the coldly furious Peter a suave statement of facts, convincing and unanswerable:

"You want to be produced on Broadway. It is not such a simple matter to be produced on Broadway as you seem to imagine. Being produced on Broadway has, I may say broadly, all the aspects of a mosaic. Many things enter into the proposition. One is a play, another is an incentive, a third is a theater, still another is a personality; oh, there are thousands of details that enter into it. If the convenience of the dramatist were all, or the convenience of the producer, or that of the personality—in other words, the star—it would be child's play. But all these things must converge, focus at a point. We may have a play and no available star or theater. We may have a star and no play or theater. Our plans have to be made and digested.

"We don't produce a play simply for the sake of making a production," explained Mr. De Freece. "It is

not as simple as all that. When we get hold of a script which seems to us to have the makings, we tie it up. We pay the author's advance and if the script at some time or other fits in with the general scheme of things, we put it on. If it doesn't we forfeit the advance."

Mr. De Freece smiled wearily, as if forfeiting the advance was quite the easiest thing he did.

"We buy twenty, twenty-five, thirty scripts in the course of a year," said Mr. De Freece. "Most of them don't turn out to fit in with the general scheme of things. We lose the advance and the authors get back their plays. The authors are indignant. They don't want their plays back; they want to be produced on Broadway. They resent our tying up their precious plays and then turning them back, but what are we to do? Sometimes we buy and forfeit a script which turns out to be a howling success in other hands. What then? It is all in the game."

Peter began to think hard.

"Signing a contract for a play's production," continued Mr. De Freece, "means a production just about one time out of five. Take your 'Fifth Wheel.' I am tempted to tie it up. In a couple of seasons or so it might come handy, but if it shouldn't, why you would have a script back on your hands with its timeliness outworn. As an act of friendship, I refrain. Submit it elsewhere, by all means. It is sure to appeal to someone.

"Consider what I am trying to do for you. Just now we need a play for Tom Colt and should you hand us such a play we will gladly give it an early production. Should you not hand us such a play, all we need do is crook a finger and a dozen eager playwrights would scramble for an opportunity of supplying our wants. We could take our pick."

Peter, at this point, was not nearly as important as he had been five minutes earlier.

"Take back your silly banknotes," advised Mr. De Freece "and put your own convenience into your pocket with them. I believe you have the makings. I want to encourage you. I am giving you some exclusive information, as a favor; namely that we want a play for Tom Colt. We hope you will do it for us because we believe you have the makings."

Mr. De Freece smiled on Peter as a kind animal trainer would smile on a novitiate dog walking on its hind legs and doing it all wrong. Peter, always abrupt in his decisions, pocketed his pride and his fifty dollars, thanked Mr. De Freece for his kindly consideration and went away with a very heavy heart.

Marguerite was almost as depressed as he when he broke the news to her on his return.

"Oh—Damn!" she said and Peter did not even give her a reproving glance. He hardly heard her. The depression lasted until faint inner stirrings notified Marguerite that it was past lunch time. Peter did not care for any luncheon; his desires were simple. All he wanted was to curl up and die.

"You won't mind if I make my lunch here?" she asked and received a sad assent.

"I think I'll make myself an omelette," said Marguerite and Peter sat up and took idle notice. It was rather like a challenge.

He watched her with growing interest as she went about it. She made no ceremony of it; she broke eggs as if they were nothing more than mere eggs. She whipped them with the first fork she came across and did not even look at what she was doing. She poured the yellow mess into a frying pan with the utmost careless-

ness. She missed all the fine points and went about it in a manner that was not far short of sloppy. Then she gave the pan a flip, another flip and turned into a plate the most perfect looking omelette that Peter had ever beheld. It had a pale golden tint that was his ambition and his despair; it was light and tender and melt-in-the-mouthish. Its symmetry was of a perfection wholly beyond him.

"Why didn't you tell me you could make such a perfect dream of an omelette?" he demanded, reproachfully.

"You never asked me sir she said," she replied, falling to.

"It makes my mouth water," said Peter. "I think I'll have one, myself, after all."

He left no artistic stone unturned. He felt that it was a test. And the omelette he produced was just an omelette, nothing more; not to be compared with the masterpiece now vanishing under Marguerite's auspices.

Marguerite's spirits rebounded in response to sustenance. In a flash she discovered that a play for Marie Durand and a play for Tom Colt was just a difference in sex, after all. They didn't have to sacrifice any of its essential values. Come to think of it, a story was a story and a thing of angles. Having written the play from an angle of Marie Durand, why not turn around and rewrite it from the slant of Tom Colt? Same story. Same climaxes.

Peter gradually saw the point.

"And about 'The Fifth Wheel,' she said. "Take it to an agent and let 'em peddle it on a commission basis. This is going to turn out good! Instead of one play we'll have two on Broadway, running simultaneously at the same time both together. Eh, what, Old Top?"

He did not resent her well-meant mockery. If she chose to ignore his patent Americanism, let her amuse herself that way. If it pleased her to make believe that he was a conventional Briton, why, far be it for him to deter her. He was even willing to enter into the joke with her. He was tremendously fond of good old Marguerite.

They got to work without loss of time. Pages and pages of the old script fitted into the new. In less than a month the thing was laid out, patched and shredded in its physical aspect, but a play. She typed a fresh script and Peter read it aloud. It was a good play and it fitted Tom Colt.

The script was submitted and three days later Peter was invited to call and talk over a contract. The contract, it appeared, was already drawn up. Not much to talk over; there it was to sign, or to leave. Even Peter's lay mind could perceive that the Ben Straus interests had not been neglected by the Ben Straus legal department, but it meant Broadway and Broadway meant Heaven, so he signed on the dotted line and received a cheque for five hundred dollars advance royalty from the auditing department. He was notified that his play would go into rehearsal for a spring try-out in the tanks almost at once.

A week passed and he was again summoned into the De Freece presence. He learned that the general stage director had gone carefully over the script and in it detected the makings. It needed a little work. Among the paragraphs in the contract was one calling on the party of the second part, who was Peter, to make such reasonable changes in said play as the party of the first part might find essential. Peter humbly accepted a sheaf of notes scribbled by Mr. De Freece and, by cutting

here, scratching there and inserting elsewhere, he incorporated the suggested changes.

"Now we have a play," said Mr. De Freece, sadly. "I have already cast it in my mind, but there is one part that eludes me."

He gave a fine exposition of being eluded. The part in question was a character bit which appeared in the first and last acts; a big, hearty, bluff vulgarian, whose manners were rough, but whose heart was of gold.

"Arbuckle's engaged," sighed De Freece. "Tom Wise is engaged. John Cope is engaged. Besides, the part's not important enough for them. Whom can you suggest?"

It flashed into Peter's mind that he had half-unconsciously put Reginald Birmingham into the character in question. He suggested Birmingham. De Freece frowned.

"Nice chap, Birmingham," he sighed. "Splendid fellow. I hear he's good to his mother."

To Peter's amazement this filial virtue appeared to be a handicap.

"Is his mother still living?" he asked, politely. De Freece gave him a startled glance.

"Too bad he drinks," said Mr. De Freece.

Peter hastened to assure him that Birmy had not touched a drop in ages. The general stage director did not appear to be impressed. Birmingham having invaded Peter's imagination, however, he could think of no one else. Mr. De Freece proceeded to commute between Forty-second street and Mars. It took him some time to get back. Then he shrugged his shoulders wearily and hinted that Peter might ask Birmingham to drop in, say, to-morrow.

Peter sought out his old friend that evening and inci-

dentally collected his royalty at the box-office. He told Birmingham all about it, including the thrilling information that he, Birmy, was considered for the character bit. The veteran flushed through his make-up of the Roman emperor and was silent and thoughtful for a space.

"Mighty good of you to fix it for me, Son," he muttered, "but better count me out. I'm leary of it."

Peter demanded particulars.

"Wait till I've washed up," said Mr. Birmingham, "and we'll have a lil' pow over at the Dutchman's.

"It's like this," said Birmingham, over his milk and seltzer, "I've never set foot on a Broadway stage and I'm scared stiff. I'd have stage-fright. I know it sounds crazy, but it's a fact. I'm nothin' but a road ham. I used to dream of Broadway, out there in sticks and tanks, I could always see myself makin' one of those over-night triumphs—everybody askin' who's the new genius. I guess every young fellow has had those dreams. But I never made the grade, or got within a million miles of it. My reputation was against me. Main Squeezes that I'd played for on the road spread the glad tidings that I was good to my mother."

"Why—De Freece said something to that effect!" blurted Peter, amazed at the coincidence. Birmingham gave one of his sheepish grins.

"When you've been on the Big Street awhile and have got so you can tell the key to the curtain from a left-hand stage brace, you'll get hep that when word goes round that an actor is good to his mother, it means he's a rotten performer, or drinks, or has something wrong with him. That's what Dan meant."

"I reassured him on the matter of—ah—drinking," said Peter, embarrassed.

"And you want your old pal to play in your nice lil' Broadway show? Much obliged, Son, but I'll feel like a damn amateur up there in front of all the wiseheimers and the death watch. Better let me stay buried down here where I can boss the lil' group of earnest workers."

There was a note of wistfulness in his voice. The Siren was calling him to the Paradise of players, but he needed urging.

"Come out of it, Old Dear," pleaded Peter, "What's the odds? There's a good salary in it and I think there's a hit in the part. Play your jolly old self and you're bound to get over! Take it subject to rehearsal. It can't do any harm and it may prove the making of you."

He did not realize that he was patronizing the old-timer.

"Well," hesitated Birmingham, "it'll mean breaking in somebody to play his Imperial Nibs, but that's all right with the bill running smooth and easy. Anyway," he concluded with the reluctance of a debutante, "I'll go up and see Dan about it."

CHAPTER XV.

MISS DOLORES MANNING TURNS ANARCHIST AND MARGUERITE FILLS A BREACH.

THE first rehearsal of "In a Manner of Speaking" was called for 11 o'clock on the bare stage of one of the Straus string of theaters. Peter, full of trepidation and accompanied by a palpitating Secretary with a sheaf of sharpened pencils and a new notebook, made a punctual appearance. The ancient stage doorkeeper stopped them.

"It's all right, Dad," smiled Marguerite. "Mr. Millard's the author of the show and I'm his secretary."

Dad looked dubious, but grudgingly permitted them to pass.

"Grouchy old duffer," commented Peter, in the passage. "What is his name?"

"Never laid eyes on him before," replied Marguerite.

"But you called him 'Dad!'"

"All stage doorkeepers are called Dad, except those that are called Pop. I'm only a demi-semi-amateur, but I know that much."

"Oh, I see," murmured Peter, feeling humiliated.

They found Mr. De Freece pacing the dim stage, hand to head and seemingly more weary than ever. There was a table down by the footlights, in the exact center, with a chair on the down-stage side of it. Above the table were a dozen other chairs, in a semi-circle. Mr. De Freece paid no attention to the newcomers, but continued

to pace like a lost soul. Others drifted in. Among the first of these was Birmingham, at sight of whom Peter felt elated. He had a friend at court, in any event, and almost hugged him.

The old-timer was arrayed with a smartness that contrasted sharply with his accustomed bagginess. He looked like the Vice-President of something dignified and prosperous and he grinned with his characteristic sheepishness as Peter noted the transformation.

De Freece stopped his pacing to count noses.

"Where's Jimmie?" he demanded, languidly.

A flashily-dressed young man with plastered hair appeared from behind a remote crate, carefully stepping on a cigarette he had hastily dropped, and advancing down-stage.

"Yes, Mr. De Freece?" he said, in the tone of a Nobody addressing an Emperor.

"Got the working script?"

"Yessir."

"Part books?"

"Yessir."

"Well—well—" frowned Mr. De Freece, waving an indefinite hand.

Jimmie dug into a brief case and produced a manuscript and a bundle of typewritten pamphlets. The script he placed meticulously on the table; the pamphlets he distributed to the dozen men and women who stood in groups, conversing in semi-whispers. The task completed, he returned to Mr. De Freece as a dog returns to his master.

"Yessir," said Jimmie.

De Freece turned tired eyes toward Peter, at the same time placing a chair to the left of the table.

"We are ready, Mr. Author," he murmured.

"Quite so," agreed Peter, and waited. The men and women had taken seats in the semi-circle.

De Freece patiently indicated the chair facing upstage.

"Well?" he said, softly, "read your play to them."

"Oh, my Goodness!" thought Peter, wilting. A wink from Birmingham nerved him. He took the indicated chair, opened the script and cleared a numb throat.

"Shall I read the cast?" he asked, timidly.

"Certainly—certainly," insisted De Freece, with irritated patience. "The title, the cast, the stage setting of Act 1, the dialogue and business of Act 1 and so on, through the play."

Peter made a start.

"Just one moment," interrupted De Freece, on his left and addressed the serious dozen from his seat. He spoke in a voice so low as to be scarcely audible, like a presiding undertaker instructing the family of the dear departed.

"I hope you will listen attentively to Mr.—ah—Millard's reading. Try to sense his meaning. Follow him with your part books for correction of errors in typing. I hope you all have pencils? I am asking Mr. Millard to read his play so that we can get his slant; take a grip on the thing in perspective, as a whole. I trust that each lady and gentleman will give close attention to the entire reading, not merely to his own part."

De Freece nodded his thanks to them and inclined his head toward Peter.

"Mr. Colt ain't here," volunteered Jimmie of the plastered hair. Mr. De Freece admonished him with his eyebrows.

Peter read his play. It was received almost in dead silence. There was an occasional titter at a bright line,

which caused Mr. De Freece to raise a mildly astonished chin. At one place he faltered in the semi-gloom. Mr. De Freece waved an indefinite finger aloft and observed:

"Lights. First border. Whites."

After a brief interval a row of electric lights above suddenly blazed. Peter stumbled no more. It required more than an hour to read the script. His vocal chords felt tired. As he entered upon the final speech there was a dismayed rustling among the listeners.

"Not the tag!" pleaded a feminine voice, "oh, not the tag!"

Peter learned to his shame that it was unlucky to pronounce the "tag" or concluding speech of a play. Superior smiles told him how crassly he had betrayed his ignorance.

Exceedingly gentle and polite applause from the dozen greeted the flushed author as he rose and said in a softness of voice that had become contagious:

"And that is the play."

There was a general shifting about. The company arose and again grouped themselves into whispering knots. Jimmie elaborately whisked chairs out of the way. Mr. De Freece made a touching appeal for a drop in three and a drop thereupon descended as if by magic. Chairs were arranged to indicate the location of doors, a piano, a mantel and other essentials. There was a pause.

"Out in front, if you don't mind," floated the voice of De Freece to the ear of Peter and the De Freece hand waved languidly toward the orchestra. Peter caught sight of Marguerite seated in a front-row seat and wondered how he was to join her. Jimmie, openly disgusted with such denseness as Peter displayed, conducted him to an iron-plated door which led to a passage back of the boxes. Peter mumbled "quite so" and was exiled from

the stage. He sat heavily next to Marguerite, who squeezed his arm and whispered:

"It sounded fine!"

The rehearsal was on. De Freece, in Peter's original place at the table and Jimmie, in the seat formerly occupied by his superior, squared away. The director spoke a few words in a tone too low to be heard across the footlights and the two players who opened the piece made their respective entrances and took up positions inside the maze of chairs. They read their lines from their part-books in mumbled and hushed tones. Peter might as well have been a mile away for all he caught of what was going on.

There came an impasse. It was Raymond Beecher's entrance and Raymond Beecher was Tom Colt, who had not yet dignified the proceedings with his attendance. Jimmie was instructed to read Raymond's lines and did so in a loud, clear voice which caused the players to smile and De Freece to squirm.

At 3 o'clock Tom Colt breezed in and looked astonished that they had proceeded without him.

"Sorry I'm a little late," he announced, pleasantly. He was a slender young man, too well dressed, almost, with a handsome, but somewhat weak face and a beatific smile. He wore a tiny moustache, which must come off before the first performance. Tom Colt always wore a tiny moustache between engagements. It advertised him as being at liberty. He spoke cordially to several of the players, slapped Mr. De Freece on the back, to that gentleman's pained annoyance, and announced that he was ready.

Mr. De Freece was openly unresponsive to the cordiality of the slap on the back and Tom made a grimace to the cast, like a small and mischievous boy in for a

scolding, but who did not care—much. Proceedings were resumed and at 5 o'clock the stage director murmured that the call was for 10:30 the following morning. Jimmie repeated the hour in penetrating tones.

"Ten-thirty is the hour, Mr. Colt," repeated De Freece with mild severity, and Mr. Colt, with another grimace, replied:

"That'll be all right, Dan."

"Unprofessional," muttered the offended one.

"I know," smiled Colt. "I apologize; won't happen again."

Peter and Marguerite arose and exchanged glances.

"Will you want me?" piped up Peter, over the footlights.

Everyone within the hearing of his voice stared at him in apparent cold horror.

"Certainly!" wailed Mr. De Freece, outraged. "Absolutely essential. There are a thousand points to be taken up. We are in a fearful condition!"

Peter, Birmingham and Marguerite dined together.

"What's got into Friend Author?" demanded Birmingham at table. "Seems just a lil' silent and subdued, eh what? as we down-east Yankees say."

"I was only thinking," sighed Peter. "After I'd read the blessed script I was banished into outer darkness and kept in like a naughty boy after school. Not a soul seemed to care whether I was there or not. I felt like a walking stick stood in a corner, yet De Freece seemed terribly put out when I asked if I'd be needed to-morrow."

"Funny rehearsal," grunted Birmingham. "Everybody going about on tiptoe as if they were afraid they'd wake the baby. I'd heard about Dan's weakness, but this was the first time I'd run into it. He's all gentility and bows and salaams; dignity and breeding, by gosh. Maybe

he's right. But I never rehearsed 'em that way. Go to it and eat it up is my system."

Peter, punctual as always, smiled on the stage doorkeeper the next morning at exactly 10:30.

"Morning, Dad," he chirped. "Have a cigar."

Dad looked over the cigar carefully. It was a good one. He put it in his cap and replaced the cap on his head.

"I hear you got a sure-fire hit," he piped in a querulous treble.

"Did the players tell you so?" asked Peter, elated.

"Players?" scoffed Dad. "*Actors?* No!" He looked his utter disgust. "Electrician was talkin' about it. Said it was a sure-fire hit. Props thought so, too."

On the stage Peter found a makeshift set of scenery in position, together with a piano, a mantel and other accessories. On a table, just outside the set, was an assortment of "props." Birmingham was staring at the table when he came up.

"Now this is what I call the ticket," he said, "working with props right from the jump-off. That's the right idea. Broadway has some advantages, after all."

Mr. De Freece held up a commanding finger from his table down center as Peter came on the scene. Peter obeyed the finger.

"Time you got to work," complained the stage director, as if Peter had been deliberately loafing on the job. "Here are a few notes I jotted down last evening. Probably you made some of your own."

Peter took the slips of paper and retorted in an injured tone:

"The only words I heard yesterday were spoken by Jimmie. Everybody else mumbled in a semi-whisper. How the deuce was I to make notes?"

The De Freece eyebrows ascended mildly.

"I can't have my ladies and gentlemen shouting, you know. Quiet refinement is the keynote. Unless I have that I cannot work. Sorry you couldn't catch them. Better sit up here to-day. Where is the—ah—very attractive young woman, your secretary?"

As in answer to a summons the very attractive young woman made her appearance through the stage door. Mr. De .Freece noted her existence with a weary, but graceful bow. Jimmie was sent skirmishing for another table for the use of the author and his secretary. The impasse of yesterday was repeated. Tom Colt was absent. This time De Freece openly despaired. He waved the players off the scene.

"We will wait," he announced in the attitude of a Christian martyr. Then he turned to where Peter sat, and whispered:

"Do you think you could adapt the part to fit Owen Rogers?"

Peter fervently declared that he could not.

"Perhaps Halmer Ericson would do it," murmured the director, absently. Halmer Ericson was a pleasant young man around whom had grown a legend. It was unanimously believed by the producing managers that all a lame script needed in order to be made whole and profitable was the surgical and corrective hand of Ericson. Yet, strangely enough, no lame script yet confided to the Ericson mercies had ever been made whole and profitable, in spite of which the legend persisted and the fashionable play-doctor was besieged with work.

"Ericson could put comedy and a punch into the play," said De Freece.

"Why doesn't he put comedy and a punch into his own plays?" demanded Peter, and to this the director deigned

no reply. Such a display of temperament was beneath his notice.

At this point Tom Colt blithely appeared and included everybody within the range of his beatific smile. The smile slowly faded when he noticed the expression on the De Freece countenance.

"Oh, I say, now—I'm not LATE?" cried Tom Colt.

There was a snicker. It might have been rehearsed, so quickly did it follow Tom's cue. De Freece looked bilious.

"Rehearsal is called at ten-thirty," he moaned, "and Mr. Colt puts in an appearance at 11:15, but we have it on the authority of Mr. Colt that he is not late."

"I am very sorry," mumbled the penitent, "but you must give a chap some leeway. Difference in clocks, you know. It's all right, Old Man; I assure you it won't happen again."

But it did happen again, repeatedly. On each occasion Mr. Colt arrived full of the highest spirits, serene in the consciousness that he had at last overcome a besetting weakness, only to be saddened by the realization that, after all, the weakness survived.

"By God," said Mr. Colt, fiercely, "I'll sleep in a dressing room. Maybe that will cure me."

"The call for to-morrow is half-past NINE," glared Mr. De Freece. The company sighed in unison. "Remember," spoke up the stage director after the day's rehearsal, "to-morrow morning at half-past nine!"

Meanwhile Jimmie had secretly imparted to all save Mr. Colt that this was a bluff and that 10:30 was the real time. The deceived young man, therefore, appeared at 10:20 on this particular occasion and was openly peeved at the trick that had been played on him. In spite of his derelictions the idea of rewriting his part to fit Owen

Rogers was not revived. Mr. Colt had a certain "draw" with the public that was not to be ignored.

Peter, himself, was absent from one rehearsal, but this was by arrangement. The agent to whom he had intrusted his play, "The Fifth Wheel," had lost no time in circulating it and it was snapped up the first time out by the Kalmann offices. Mr. Millard's presence was required to sign the contract, receive the cheque and chat over a tentative cast with Mr. Kalmann in person.

Mr. Kalmann was unction itself. He treated Peter as a brother and an equal and he opened his arms to him. The fact that Peter had a play in rehearsal with Straus was comforting to Mr. Kalmann, who carried a greater weight of breeding than Peter was wholly prepared for.

The matter of the cast was approached. Prominent names rippled from the Kalmann lips like cascades of pearls. Evidently he had in mind an all-star company. It all seemed so easy. When Peter ventured the fear that this eminent actor or that equally eminent actress was under contract to some other producer, Mr. Kalmann smiled and declared quietly "that will be all right." He seemed to intimate that he had ways and means, unknown to the run of mankind, of securing whomever he fancied. Nothing absolutely definite was decided, but when Peter left, $500 richer, he carried away with him a hazy impression that George M. Cohan, Otis Skinner, William Collier, Elsie Janis and at least a couple of Barrymores would be included in Mr. Kalmann's scheme of things.

Peter dropped in on his agent to turn over the 10 per cent commission and recited Mr. Kalmann's tentative list. The agent was interested, apparently, but not nearly as impressed as Peter. The agent knew Mr. Kalmann and his amiable weakness.

The rehearsal period now began to assume certain traits of nerve-racking uncertainty. Momentous changes were made in the manuscript; the title was altered every two or three days. Tom Colt objected to "In a Manner of Speaking," because it did not bring in his character. The same objection prevailed against "The Point of View."

"Don't give us a literary title," sighed Mr. De Freece. "What we want is a money title. Something like 'The Siren and Caesar,' or 'Very Much B. C.' You did it for those plays. Do it for us."

The young author was also the recipient of many suggestions from members of the cast, delivered confidentially with nods and winks, and all of them calculated to vastly improve the play. Miss Nora Maguire, who had once scored a hit in a scene of delicate intoxication, imparted to him in the strictest secrecy that what this play really needed was a scene of delicate intoxication for Miss Nora Maguire. Other helpful hints from different members of the company were along somewhat similar lines, all intended to amplify and fatten the particular parts played by the tipsters. Peter discovered many subtle irons thrust into his little fire.

Another matter that disturbed him was the general acceptance of the theory that the only person connected with the enterprise who was obviously incapable of exercising a voice of authority in the destiny of the play was the playwright. He was tolerated as an unobjectionable and casual child is tolerated at a grown-up party. He could not understand it. They seemed to like him well enough, but their attitude plainly indicated that they considered him nothing but an author. The single exception was the blonde little neophyte who, as a parlor maid, had six words to deliver in the third act. She

looked upon him as an Authority and a Power and on a certain occasion managed to convey to him privately the wish that some nice man would interest himself in her career. Peter was flattered, but did not volunteer for the job.

Two days before the dress rehearsal Mr. Colt produced from his inner consciousness the final and absolute title. It was "The Winning Smile." Everybody acclaimed it as an inspiration and the only possible title for the comedy. Everybody, that is, except Peter, who pointed out timidly that there was nothing in the play itself to justify such a name.

"That's easy!" declared Tom Colt in the highest good humor. "Stick a line or two in. Have one of the characters say something in the first act about Raymond Beecher's winning smile. Refer to it again in the second act and work it into the tag. You ought to give me one per cent for thinking of it."

De Freece concurred. He said it was a money title.

And now other disturbing episodes happened in a manner to rasp the nerves even of a young man whose custom it was to perspire ice water in August.

It had been a hard day for Peter. With the opening in Norfolk only three days distant the piece seemed not to be "set." They had changed the title for the ninth and last time and Tom Colt had discovered a brand-new objection to the second act climax. The leading woman had all the gravy. It was her scene, not his. Not that he cared a hang as an artist, but the public expected him to dominate. His was the featured name on the billing; he could not conscientiously disappoint his public. So the scene was rehearsed in a new way and in the midst of it Miss Dolores Manning, the leading lady, who had

not been consulted, abruptly left the stage and went into a twilit corner to weep. She declared to all the world that the show was being stolen from her, that she was now no better than a feeder and that she would not stand for it. She advised Mr. De Freece to get a forty-dollar-a-week woman in her high-priced place. She complained that she was not being treated as a recognized artist and a lady and announced that if Straus expected her to open with the show he had another guess coming.

Mr. De Freece was in despair and his head ached more spectacularly than ever. Mr. Colt smiled amiably as one who need not worry, having scored his point. The company generally acted a bit panicky and stared at one another with blank looks.

Miss Manning, having concluded her weeping and powdered her nose, was about to walk out of the theater. Mr. De Freece was in the very act of shrugging his overburdened shoulders in resignation and letting her go without a protest, when Reginald Birmingham, who all through the trying days of rehearsal had been a docile and unobtrusive cog in the machinery, murmured meekly to the distracted stage director:

"Say, Dan, shall I try my hand with her?"

De Freece gave a pessimistic nod of assent and Birmingham immediately reacted.

"Hey, Sweetheart! Wait a minute," he called to the departing and offended artist. Miss Manning, who was beginning to fear that no one would stop her, slacked her pace and permitted Birmingham to overtake her. He shunted her into the property room. The company breathed a collective sigh of hope.

Fifteen minutes later they emerged. Miss Manning looked a little grim, but quite triumphant and Birmingham openly elated.

"It's all right, folks!" he cried cheerily and crossed the stage, followed at a distance by Miss Manning. Birmingham whispered a few earnest words to the smiling Tom Colt, whose smile was suddenly obliterated even as he listened. Then the young man with a sinister glitter in his usually mild eyes was heard to say in reply to Birmingham's whispers:

"You may tell Miss Manning with my compliments that I will see her in the uttermost and nethermost depths of hell before I will apologize."

The voice was clear and the words were crisply uttered. They fell like a bomb in the midst of the agitated company. Miss Manning gave vent to something not unlike a shriek.

"I wouldn't work with that stuck-up loafer," she asserted with conviction, "if he got down on his knees and crawled to kiss the hem of my garment."

The person referred to gave no sign that he had even remotely considered such an action.

"Ha!" said Mr. Colt, loftily, and repeated it. "Ha!"

Miss Manning turned on a French heel and made her way out of the theater, without let or hindrance. Blank despair settled down on the company. Even Birmingham seemed crushed.

"We may as well cancel Norfolk right now," sighed Mr. De Freece. "And the town is billed and everything. God, what a life!"

A flash of inspiration came to Peter. He turned to Marguerite who was on the verge of nervous tears.

"You must know this part," he said suavely. "Couldn't you jump in and play it?"

Marguerite gasped with the suddenness of it.

"Oh, my goodness!" she cried. "I don't know. Maybe I could." She glanced at De Freece, who was

waving an indefinite arm. The light of reason came into his eyes.

"Wait—wait—" he murmured, counseling patience while he summoned his faculties. The faculties were summoned.

"I caught you in that prehistoric bit," he mused. "You were all right. I distinctly recall saying to myself, 'she has the makings.' I would have dropped in back-stage to ask you to call some day, but I had a thousand things to do. Yes, I distinctly remember. Good idea—ah—Mr. Millard."

Mr. De Freece jumped into tremendous activity. He clapped his hands sharply and raised his voice:

"Back to Hester's entrance in Act 1," he commanded. "We may open in Norfolk, after all!"

Mr. Colt looked somewhat dubious, but Birmingham reassured him from behind a screening hand that the lil' lady was the goods and would be amenable to Mr. Colt's position as a featured player.

Marguerite was nervous but game. She had unconsciously imbibed every line of the entire play, which was not surprising, since she had repeatedly typed it and had sat in at three weeks of rehearsals. Once under way she gained confidence and managed to give a reassuring rehearsal. The second act climax found her feeding Mr. Colt in a manner to warm his heart. The curtain was all his. The company were elated almost to the point of hysteria. They had seen an indefinite postponement of the opening and consequently of salary day and rescue had come down out of the clouds.

"It's a lucky thing for every one of us!" declared Tom Colt, his beatific smile restored to perfect working order. "Daisy will act rings around that Manning dame, won't you, Dear?"

When Mr. Colt approved of a person, more particularly a feminine person, he signified it by inventing a pet name for her.

"You can bet your sweet lil' life she'll act rings around her!" boomed Birmingham. He regarded Marguerite as his artistic creation, just as he regarded Peter as his discovery. He was vicariously getting a lot out of the situation. Mr. De Freece kept murmuring, as to himself, "I always said she had the makings; all the time I said it." Miss Nora Maguire, who had suffered a bad season and was low in her purse, kissed Marguerite like a mother welcoming a prodigal daughter. All in all, Marguerite was having a pretty good time.

"Two hours for dinner," announced De Freece, consulting his watch, "and then we will come back and go through the whole play, just once, for the benefit of—ah —Daisy." He had picked up Tom Colt's pet name with astonishing readiness.

The weary players made their several ways to dinner and a breathing spell. Tom Colt, who had from the first, picked out the ingenue and marked her for his personal attentions, wavered between his devotion to the ingenue and his new interest in Marguerite. But Marguerite decisively attached herself to Peter and the ingenue was saved from humiliation. Birmingham, as a matter of course, joined his protégés. They decided to celebrate by dining expensively at Shanley's.

Marguerite rather felt as if she were sitting on a throne with a particularly conspicuous crown on her royal brow. Peter sang her praises and his gratitude until he ran out of adjectives and Birmingham took up the paean where Peter left off. She had saved them all and incidentally made herself. No more Community bunch for her, she thought. She would be a Broadway

fixture along with Birmy and darling Peter; she had won to the good graces of the all-powerful De Freece and her future was assured.

In the meantime an exceedingly doubtful leading lady, who needed an engagement in what she admitted to herself was the worst way, sat tearfully in her bijou up-town apartment and put in some hard thinking.

Miss Dolores Manning was facing disagreeable facts. She had committed the unpardonable in walking out of a part on the eve of an opening. It was unprofessional and anarchistic and she would never have done it only she was all on edge. She regretted every detail of the occurrence. Especially she regretted having called Tom Colt a stuck-up loafer, which was Gawd's truth, but tactless. He would have it in for her, for that, and Dan De Freece would have it in for her for quitting cold. She hadn't meant to, but no Matinee Lizard was going to invite her to go to hell and get away with it without hearing from her on the subject. Oh, well, she needed the money and would let by-gones be by-gones.

Miss Manning's plans, however, went awry. Rehearsal the following morning was earlier than she had figured it would be and when she reached the theater things were in full swing. The red-headed stenographer was going through the abandoned part like a veteran and everybody appeared to be happy and satisfied. Mr. De Freece looked at Miss Manning with the eyes of a disapproving fish; at sight of her Tom Colt gave vent to his most aggravating "ha!" and the players all seemed afraid to speak to her. Miss Manning realized all too clearly that she was In Dutch.

Rehearsal was interrupted long enough for Mr. De Freece to notify her, patiently and wearily, that she had forfeited all consideration at the hands of the Straus of-

fices; that she need never apply for another engagement as long as Mr. De Freece was in good voice, and, in short, that she might consider herself definitely out of it. To cap the climax he asked for her part-book. Nothing could be more final than that.

Miss Manning announced that she would see her lawyer and Mr. De Freece urged her to, by all means, but would she please excuse him, as he had a thousand things to do——

There was no sympathy for Miss Manning apparent anywhere on the premises. It was a conspiracy against her! They had had that red-headed Thing on hand all along, posing as a stenographer, to sit in and watch her business and steal the part from her after she had worked it up. There was no justice in the world. The show business had come to a terrible pass.

Miss Dolores Manning made a dismal exit from the theater and from the pages of this history.

CHAPTER XVI.

PETER ATTENDS A GENUINE DRESS REHEARSAL AND ACTS ON DAD'S TIP.

THE theater was lighted, back and front. Out in the auditorium were a select few from the Straus offices, including Mr. Straus, who appeared to be in an attitude of abject apology for intruding at all. The husbands, wives and mothers of several of the cast were also present. Peter, of course, was there, feeling lost without the companionship of Marguerite. De Freece, frowning and solitary, paced the aisles with a hand to his head. From the other side of the lowered curtain came sounds of language and of hammering. Expensive scenery, fresh from the studios, was being assembled for the first time. Peter, in a state of repressed excitement bordering on funk, sat in nine or ten orchestra chairs successively and then wandered back stage through the boxes.

The stage crew were cheerfully doing things all wrong under the palpitating direction of Jimmie, who was to go with the show as stage manager and was trying his hand at bossing matters unsheltered by the omniscient De Freece. Flymen, out of sight but distinctly audible, were lowering wrong backings and raising them again to lower other wrong backings. The chief electrician was making experiments with purple sunsets and begging for amber borders. Clearers in white cotton gloves which left no finger marks were serenely bringing on Act 2 furniture for the Act 1 setting and being profanely reproved by

Jimmie, whose hair bade fair to crack like patent leather pumps under the strain.

Actors in their make-up and stage clothes wandered about, oblivious to the racket, nervously mumbling lines to themselves and stopping now and then to indulge in meaningless pantomime. The ladies of the company took inquisitive and timid peeps and fluttered back to their dressing rooms.

Peter had "Gangway!" yelled at him by a couple of grips who were rushing a wide flat to its position. He stepped out of their way to have "gangway!" yelled at him by a pair of clearers who were wheeling a brand-new piano to its place. He obliged the clearers and felt humble and awkward. He stumbled over a cocoanut runner laid to deaden footfalls off-stage and bumped into a large stranger in a shabby frock coat and wide soft hat, who said "hello, Son," and proved to be Birmy, ready for his first-act entrance.

The flymen, having lowered and raised all the wrong backings, ultimately came upon the right one. The electrician got his amber border and modified his purple sunset with a dash of lemon and a touch of rose pink. The clearers carted off the second act stuff and brought on that which properly belonged and the flats were slapped together and duly braced by the carpenter and grips.

The call had been for everybody in the theater at 7 o'clock, curtain to rise at 8, and as it was now only 9:15 the dress rehearsal got under as promptly as could be expected.

"Stage clear!" yelled Jimmie, perspiring, and took a position at the curtain signal. There was a scurrying of stage hands and players. Peter retired to the front of the house and got there in time to see the asbestos make a slow and dignified ascent.

The scene represented the living room of a country house, with French windows looking out on a garden at sunset. There was an inconsiderable pause, then a woman's voice was heard calling, "Jed! Oh, Jed, where are you?" and Nora Maguire appeared, pink and white as to complexion and tremulous as to the remainder of her. Miss Maguire looked about for the absent Jed, but with an eye for the front of the house, and was joined by the ingenue, who was about to speak when an arresting voice came from the auditorium.

"Stop. Wait a moment. Go back." It was De Freece.

The ingenue ceased from simpering and Miss Maguire became Miss Maguire again. They disappeared, crestfallen and puzzled.

"Jimmie!"

Jimmie stuck his head through a doorway.

"Going to keep your house lights up?" asked Mr. De Freece, in a tone of polite interest.

"Gosh!" said Jimmie, and called over his shoulder: "Whatinell's the matter? Douse your houselights!"

"Wait!" again commanded De Freece, standing in an aisle. "That piano is up too far. Where's the vase with the hidden note on the mantel? You've got second act drapes to those windows."

Jimmie wilted. Recovering, he got exceedingly savage with Props. Props became indignant:

"Well, I done what you told me. You never told me nothing about that there vase for no mantel." Props was a good union man and would stand only so much. The curtain remained up while the piano was pushed down a few inches, the wrong drapes were removed and the correct drapes attached and Props came sulkily on with the missing vase. Then the auditorium was dark-

ened, the stage was savagely cleared by Jimmie and once more Miss Maguire entered in quest of Jed to encounter the simpering ingenue.

For five minutes or so all went well. Miss Maguire and the ingenue told each other what the audience needed to know and were hitting on all twelve, so to speak, when Miss Maguire gasped, fluttered and went up in her lines.

"Who is holding the book?" asked Mr. De Freece, again politely interested. It appeared that nobody was holding the book. Jimmie was summoned. He didn't know anything about anybody holding any book. He couldn't do it. He had that off-stage automobile effect to work and he had to run the whole stage and——

"As a matter of fact," complained Mr. De Freece, patiently, "there shouldn't be any prompting. You people have had ample time to get up in your lines. I know all about first-night nervousness. This isn't a first night. It's a dress rehearsal. Mr. Millard—will *you* oblige by going up and holding the book for the benefit of Miss Maguire?"

Miss Maguire gave signs of impending tears and didn't need to have a book held on her. She was dead letter perfect, only Miss Baldwin gave her the wrong cue.

Miss Baldwin looked very un-ingenue daggers at Miss Maguire and begged her pardon. That was the way they had rehearsed that particular cue. Obedient to a nod from De Freece, Peter hurried back stage, took up his position in the first entrance on the prompt side and held a copy of the script. He felt a light kiss on his neck. It was, of course, Marguerite, and the kiss tickled. She glided away as the performance was renewed, Miss Baldwin indulging in a vicious gleam of triumph and Miss Maguire apologizing acidly when the disputed cue was

identified as being quite as Miss Baldwin had originally spoken it.

Birmingham, his rough exterior concealing his heart of gold, came on like an old warhorse scenting the smoke of battle. Tom Colt appeared and was greeted by pattering applause from the husbands, wives and mothers. His beatific smile became angelic. Marguerite made her modest entrance and Peter wanted to applaud, but his hands held the book. The piece was in full swing. The stage lights gradually dimmed into a perfectly gorgeous sunset with not an ounce too much of purple in it. Tom Colt appropriated the sunset by standing with uplifted face and squared shoulders, gazing into the bunch light whence it came and soliloquizing softly, "I wonder!"

The drop descended, leaving the auditorium pitch-dark except for the red exit signs. There was a prolonged pause.

"House lights!" suggested the apologetic, timid voice of Ben Straus, and the electrician awoke from dreams of triumph to ask the switchboard man what was keeping him. In the course of an hour or so the second act set was made ready to an accompaniment of much hammering and vocal discord. Meanwhile, Peter wandered out in front and seeking out De Freece, who was in confidential converse with Mr. Straus, raised inquiring eyebrows. In reply De Freece shrugged eloquent shoulders.

"What do *you* think?" asked Mr. Straus, anxiously. Peter cocked his head, noncommitally.

"I hope you're right," said Mr. Straus, taking this pantomime to be optimistic. "She stands me seventeen thousand dollars, not counting the transportation to Norfolk."

The quotation astonished Peter. It seemed a large sum to pay for a production no more elaborate than this. He did not know that Mr. Straus had included in his

computation a pro rata of the entire overhead expense of the Straus offices, an item of five thousand for director's fees, of which Mr. De Freece would actually receive two thousand, the full original price of certain draperies salvaged from a prior and unsuccessful production and other minor items of similar nature. Straus had a silent partner in the present enterprise, which might explain his method of figuring.

"The piano is a mistake," murmured De Freece. "Too new. Looks as if the price tag had just been removed."

"Wait till she's been banged about a couple of weeks," said Straus, mournfully. "The very latest in Steinways. Ten hundred and fifty with the discount off. When we do things, we do them right." This broad statement would appear to include the silent partner.

The stage crew eventually permitted the second act to proceed. Peter forgot to return to his position in the prompt entrance, but his services were not needed. As the rehearsal progressed he felt conscious of a certain sinking sensation. The play did not seem to stand out as he had visualized it while working on the script. Birmingham had, to be sure, forewarned him not to expect tangible reactions. "You can't make the chairs laugh," was how he had put it. There were not more than forty or fifty people in the house. Peter knew that he was too close to things to judge them with accuracy, but, somehow, the characters did not seem to absorb interest enough. Corking good cast; he couldn't blame the players. Even Marguerite. She was positively eating it up, and Birmy was a delight.

At 2 o'clock the final curtain descended, the tag still unspoken. From behind the asbestos came the high voice of Jimmie.

"Everybody have a look at the call-board!" the voice

said. The call-board notified the members of "The Winning Smile" company to be on hand at the Pennsylvania Railroad station at 9:30 A. M. Rehearsal at the theater in Norfolk was called for 11 o'clock of the following morning.

"What's the use of going to bed?" grumbled Mr. Colt and the others took their cue from him. Unearthly hour to expect people to be on deck after an all-night rehearsal. Good nights were tossed in Peter's direction as he waited for Marguerite to emerge from the privacy of her dressing room. He would take her home in a taxi, which would also convey him to his own diggings. She came out at last, her face shining and unpowdered and her shoulders drooping from weariness.

Dad, on guard at the stage-door, grinned cheerfully at them.

"The whole blame stage crew say you got a sure-fire hit," he announced. "Ain't that good news for you and your sweetie?"

Marguerite shivered suddenly. Peter blandly ignored Dad's kindly impertinence, but he felt the tremor in her arm and it set him to thinking.

Peter had gradually come to realize that Marguerite was uncommonly fond of him. She had made no especial effort to hide it. She never pawed him, as Helen used to, but she gave other unmistakable signs of partiality. In the matter of his cravats, for instance. He had heard or read somewhere that a girl who particularly noticed and fussed with a man's cravats betrayed her love for said man. Marguerite knew all his ties by heart. She had a way with her; a pull and a pat and the tie became a perfect achievement, while he could bother for half an hour and the thing wouldn't come right.

She had virtually effaced herself for him; had made his

interests her own. She had worn her fingers to the bone, by Jove, worked to all hours with never a sign of weariness. She was, in short, a Brick. See how she had jumped to the rescue in the matter of Dolores Manning! Wonderful girl, no less. She deserved appreciation, reward, riches—in short, Peter concluded that she deserved Peter, since she had apparently set her heart on him. Too bad he could not thrill to the idea, but that sort of thing, evidently, had been left out of his composition. He could, at least, try to make her happy, devote himself to her in return for her devotion.

With Peter to decide was to act. He ultimately found her hand in the gloom of the car and felt its friendly, affectionate pressure.

"I say, Old Girl," blurted Peter, "why shouldn't we marry, what?"

At that instant the car came to a stop opposite her door. Marguerite gave a startled little cry of utter amazement and then broke into hysterical laughter. Peter was dismayed. Queer way she had of receiving so momentous a question.

"You crazy Old Thing!" she sputtered. "If it isn't just like you to spring a thing like that between the curbstone and the front door! Get out, Silly, or the chauffeur will be getting notions."

He scrambled out and stood at chivalrous attention, giving her a hand as she descended.

"Wait a bit," he said to the taxi driver and accompanied her to her vestibule.

"Well?" asked Peter. "How about it?"

"Peter," replied Marguerite, "you're a perfect darling, but——"

"But what?"

"I don't believe I shall ever marry you."

"Why not?" he demanded, nonplussed.

"It's the middle of the night and the taxi is waiting and this is no place for a love scene."

"Is your answer—no?"

"There isn't any answer—yet."

She had found the lock in the dark and the door swung open.

"Good night, Dear, and don't oversleep. See you at the train in the morning."

The door closed decisively between them and Peter returned to the taxi, his brain rather muddled.

"Well, anyway," said Peter to himself, "there's that."

CHAPTER XVII

PETER SETS OUT ON A HIGHLY MOMENTOUS VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY.

IT was a heavy-eyed group of players and mechanicians that assembled at the railroad station and rallied around the person of an aloof Mr. De Freece. The stage director was in languid converse with a jerky, energetic young man whom the company had not seen before, but who proved to be Sam Bloom, selected to be manager "with the show" of "The Winning Smile" organization.

Peter found them all waiting except Tom Colt. His eyes sought Marguerite and found her chatting with Nora Maguire and Miss Baldwin. She gave him frank and smiling recognition and there was nothing in her expression that enlightened him. She might have forgotten all about last night for all he could read in her face.

Miss Baldwin was in a stew about Tom Colt. The others were in a stew about him, too, but Miss Baldwin's took on the attributes of a personal and intimate stew. She related once more how she had phoned him and he had replied that he was just out of his bath and had plenty of time, but she warned him and said not to be late and he promised her he wouldn't and here it was train time and no Tom Colt!

The announcer howled something through a megaphone about Track 16 and mentioned Washington and Norfolk among several places of interest. The barred gates were thrown open and a uniformed man with a

ticket punch took command. Mr. Bloom produced a sheaf of tickets and like a shepherd indicated his sheep as they filed past the guardian like children on a school picnic, carefree and irresponsible. They were being personally conducted by other and wiser heads and had no worries. Their trunks were either with the train, or were not.

They all piled into one day coach, actors, manager, stage crew and director. The train started. Tom Colt was being left behind. Miss Baldwin was in a state of agitation and declared that something ought to be done about it. Marguerite, the character woman, the walking lady and the pretty little blonde neophyte consoled her. She behaved rather like a bride who had lost her bridegroom.

Since Marguerite elected to attach herself to the feminine contingent, Peter found a seat with Birmingham, who perfectly carried out that idea of a schoolboy on a picnic. He was the only one in the company who appeared to regard Peter as a reasonably essential human being and not a mere author. By twos and twos the men disappeared into the smoker. There was a candid tendency on their part to ignore the ladies, which tendency the ladies reciprocated. Peter wondered why.

"Women," said Birmingham, "are a damn nuisance on the road and who wants to be a satchel-carrier?"

It was suddenly discovered that Ben Straus was not on the train. Something akin to panic ensued. It developed that Ben Straus was to come down by yacht with a special party of friends and would arrive in time for the opening. General relief.

At Philadelphia a telegram from Tom Colt was delivered to Mr. De Freece. Mr. Colt had unaccountably missed Number 46, but would proceed at 11:25 on Num-

ber 48. More general relief. Miss Baldwin breathed again, but murmured something about what she would say to Master Tom, when Master Tom made his appearance. There were sly smiles.

Peter spent much time seeing the country out of the car window. It was his country; he had filed his declaration of intention and was half a citizen. In three years he would be wholly a citizen, with a vote and a voice in the government, by Jove. It was a fine country; not as spic and span as England, perhaps, but a fine country for all that. And such a lot of it! Full of people who were free and equal and democratic; all of them sovereigns on their own.

His thoughts wandered to Marguerite. She had said she didn't believe she would marry him, but had made the reservation that this wasn't her answer. Jolly ass to have popped as he did, at the end of the ride. Took her by surprise, of course. Did he love her? Of course he did! What rot. As well ask if he loved good old Birmy. Two perfect pals, better than any man deserved, let alone the undeserving Peter. He loved Birmy like a brother, a considerably elder brother, and he loved Marguerite —like a brother? No, by George, it couldn't be like that. Anyway, he loved her and love was love, so why bother to go into analysis? He owed everything to Marguerite and Birmy. Good old Birmy. Good old Marguerite. Good old—Peter was getting sleepy and the rhythm of the rails was translating itself into meaningless repetitions of "good old Birmy, good old Marguerite."

A very black man in very white linen passed through, announcing the first call to lunch in the dining car. It reminded Peter that he was hungry.

"Come on, Son," yawned Birmingham, stretching. Peter felt that he ought to pick up Marguerite and looked

about for her. She was not in the car. Perhaps she had already gone to luncheon. But neither was she in the dining car. Birmy and he were conducted to a table for two. It was a new experience for Peter, this dining on a train.

They were half through luncheon when Marguerite appeared in a group of four women who were conducted to a table across the aisle. She smiled at him and he reproached her with a look, whereupon she made the merest suggestion of a "face."

On his way out he stopped at her table.

"Where have you been hiding yourself?" he demanded.

"Oh," said Marguerite, "we girls have bought seats in the parlor car and Nora is vamping the Congressman from Yap Hank something scandalous. We play Washington next week and she's laying her cables accordingly. Expects to shake hands with President Woodie and everything."

"Bet the President will come to see the show," hazarded Miss Maguire. "They say that he's a regular show-shop fan."

"Vodevull's his long suit," announced Miss Baldwin, "but if our press agent's any good, he'll lure him into a box before the week's out. I hope he does. I never got a good look at him."

Peter thrilled at the thought of the reigning President attending a performance of his play. Almost like a royal command.

"Shall we purchase seats in the parlor car?" he suggested to Birmingham, waiting patiently at his elbow.

"Forget it," grumbled Birmy. "Day coach is plenty good enough for regular troupers."

"Yes," agreed Miss Maguire, with a mischievous twinkle, "and you'd only break up a fine flirtation your

sweetie has started with a confectionery drummer. That pays you off for the congressman from Yap Hank."

This time it was Peter who squirmed and Marguerite who appeared unconcerned. She did not even glance at him.

The hours passed. They entered Washington, changed to another train across the track and were on their way again. Night fell. Peter's bones ached. Never in his life had he so felt the need of exercise. It was like crossing the precious continent. Started at 9 in the morning and here it was 8 at night and they were still going. Gad! What a country!

Norfolk at last. Nearly midnight and hot. He had come from Spring into veritable Summer. And what a lot of black people! They seemed to swarm. They reminded him of children among grown-ups, ingratiating and sheepish. He mentioned it to Birmingham.

"Down here," said the veteran, yawning, "they know how to keep the niggers in their place. This is the South, Son."

Birmy led him by a grip on the arm to a Ford relic driven by a black man. He mentioned a name and a ride of two minutes brought them to their hotel. He scanned the register for the name of Miss Marguerite Taylor. It was not there.

"I heard the girls say something about going to the Mansion House," Birmingham was saying. "But the Jefferson's good enough for me. Wait till you hit their fried chicken and hominy for breakfast. It is certainly very good Eddie."

A negro boy in faded uniform captured his bag.

"Two adjoining rooms and a bath between and remember it's professional rates, Colonel," said Birmingham to the weary clerk. The clerk consulted a chart and

produced two small keys on very large brass checks. A second negro boy captured Birmingham's bag.

"Third flo' up. De elevator ain't a-runnin'," said the second negro boy.

Birmingham grunted.

"This is certainly the lil' old Sunny South," he sighed.

The shabby theater seemed not to have been recently dusted. The proscenium needed the services of a painter. The dressing rooms were not nice; there was a hit-or-miss atmosphere about the bare stage, where shabby and even torn flats were piled helter-skelter. Peter's British sense of neatness was shocked. The local stage carpenter was chewing tobacco. Peter had never seen it done before. He decided he didn't care for it.

A cheer arose from the assembled company, in which a trace of sarcasm was mingled with the general relief. Mr. Tom Colt, with a smile of happy innocence, made an entrance which he had carefully worked up for himself.

"Awfully sorry," said Tom Colt. "Missed it by a hair. Such a thing never happened to me before. Lonesome trip without my little playmates. Hello, Daisy—and, look who's here! Little Carrie! How's Carrie?"

Miss Baldwin, thus addressed, gave him a look of tragic reproach and would have taken possession of him, but he brushed her lightly aside and advanced to De Freece, who was grimly silent. He held out a hand, which De Freece ignored.

"Awfully sorry. You got my telegram, of course?" murmured Mr. Colt.

"Unprofessional," muttered Mr. De Freece, gloomily.

"I know," agreed Colt in charming sympathy. "Over-

slept. Up all night. Won't happen again. What do we rehearse?"

It appeared that there were many things to rehearse; minor points shown to be faulty at the dress rehearsal and corrected by De Freece without consulting the author. Cuts, mostly. The piece was estimated to run ten minutes too long. The players got to work, while the company crew received "The Winning Smile" stuff from the house crew, quite in accordance with Union rules, and proceeded to hammer and issue orders and hang drops and shout for Number Six lines and lines otherwise numbered. In the orchestra trench five tired musicians and a drummer who obviously was not tired rehearsed the entre-act music. All was noise and confusion and in the midst of the hub-bub the unruffled players marked part books, rehearsed scenes and serenely lost themselves in their own business.

The shabby old "opera house," so called, was not nearly filled. The evening was moist and warm and Norfolk betrayed no marked interest in the first performance on any stage of "The Winning Smile." Peter nervously paced the lobby, having feasted his eyes to satiety on the three-sheet announcement that a Comedy in Three Acts by Peter F. Millard was to be Presented Under the Personal Direction of Ben Straus, with a Cast Including the Eminent Comedian, Tom Colt. He noticed that several of the arriving theater patrons were smartly dressed. He joined Mr. Sam Bloom, who was standing idly at the door, where a local man was taking tickets and tearing off the stubs.

"We're getting the quality," sighed Mr. Bloom, "but the hoi polloi don't seem to be coming."

The man on the door mentioned a summer park that had chosen that evening to open for the season.

"Ah," said Mr. Bloom, "and I suppose maybe our pastor is having a donation party at the parsonage. That accounts for it. We can't expect to buck against ice cream and lemonade." The man on the door looked hurt, but did not reply.

Polite applause greeted the salient points of "The Winning Smile." Mr. Colt got his share of it on his entrance and it was scattered throughout the performance at encouragingly close intervals. Polite laughter greeted Peter's best quips. It was an intelligent audience and willing to be amused.

He encountered Ben Straus, in yachting togs, in the lobby after the first act. Mr. Straus was meekly listening to the comment of a group of prosperous strangers who were also in yachting togs. His eye caught Peter's and he smiled ingratiatingly.

"Meet Mr. Millard, our author," he said, without mentioning the gentlemen's names. They nodded pleasantly and told Peter he had a neat little play, very neat indeed. If the second act was as good as the first and the third didn't drop, it was over. Unquestionably it was over.

He felt encouraged. This cross-section of Broadway, transplanted to Norfolk, knew what it was talking about. After the second act he encountered De Freece.

"It has the makings," sighed the stage director, "but it needs work. Your Marguerite Taylor is a treasure. I'm glad I thought of her for Manning's part. She'll prove a discovery. Rehearsal in Richmond at noon. Don't fail us."

The conclusion of the performance brought a patter of applause, but no curtain call. The energetic drummer, assisted by the five tired musicians, played the small

audience out. Peter took up a position in the lobby and cocked an attentive ear for comments. He heard nothing derogatory. They appeared to have selected Miss Baldwin for special praise and this irritated him. Marguerite should have had that honor. On the whole he felt disappointed, dissatisfied. It should have been better, somehow. He was uncomfortable and the thought of receiving more or less hollow congratulations back stage deterred him from joining the company. Instead he went to the hotel and waited for Birmy. But Birmy did not come and, vaguely uneasy, Peter retired at midnight. He hoped good old Birmy hadn't weakened and fallen off the wagon.

A sound of splashing in the bathroom awoke him. It was 9 o'clock and the sun was dyeing his window shades orange. Birmy entered his room, muffled in a bathrobe, his thin, gray hair standing in moist wisps.

"Why weren't you at the lil' supper last night, Son?" he asked, cheerily.

"What supper?" Peter demanded, blinking and sitting up in bed.

"Why, Ben Straus gave a supper to the cast and his yachting pals. Champagne, shad roe and all the fixings."

"I knew nothing about it," said Peter.

"That's darn funny," mused Birmingham. "Did you see Ben? and he didn't invite you? Must have forgotten to, or he thought Dan De Freece had tended to it. That's probably it."

"I am not in the least surprised," observed Peter, frigidly. "I am only the author, you know."

"There, there, Son," crooned Birmingham, soothingly, "mustn't let a lil' oversight get on our nerves. I'll turn on your bath and wait breakfast for you. Train leaves at 10:28."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MOMENTOUS VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY DEVELOPS DISCOURAGING FEATURES.

THE Norfolk morning paper was pedantic and patronizing in its criticism of "The Winning Smile." On the whole it found merit, but it found also inexperience, faulty construction, a straining of the verities, crude characterization and a redundancy of dialogue. It was very good—but.

Peter was the only one who appeared to be interested in what the Norfolk morning paper had to say on the subject.

"What are you ruining your eyes readin' that stuff for?" asked Birmingham. "We honest-to-gawd actors don't give a hoot what the bright man thinks, if anything. Tank troupers cut out his stuff and paste it in their lil' books, because Norfolk is a big town to them, but it's only a dog to us, a place to try her out and everything that comes in at the front door is so much to the good.

"That Richmond chap is some punkins. He knows more about the drama than old Bill Shakespeare and he takes himself so seriously that he's a joke. Roanoke and Lynchburg swear by him and he exercises a big influence on those centers of Art, Charlottesville and Vance Court House. He usually disagrees with the New York critics on principle and keeps wondering why the

shows he roasts have the nerve to keep on playing after he's voted thumbs down."

Richmond was a repetition of Norfolk. The audience was small, select, politely attentive and mildly appreciative. Mr. Straus and the yachting party were not in evidence; they would catch the opening in Washington. Peter hired a "hack" in Richmond and drove about the dignified, shabby-genteel old town in company with Birmingham. He had wanted to take Marguerite, but she continued to be strangely elusive. Peter was still the uneasy fish awaiting a verdict in the matter of the hook. Birmingham, noting Peter's lackadaisical air of detachment attributed it to the reception accorded to "The Winning Smile" the night before.

"Cheer up, Sport," he counseled. "We haven't had a real line yet on what we got. Washington will give us a straight steer. Wise and cosmopolitan audience in that burg. Town's full of everybody but Washingtonians. Everybody comes from somewhere else and is working for Uncle Sam. Don't you mind about Norfolk, Son. At that, if we'd stayed over I bet the second night would have packed the old show shop. The first night's audience spread the glad tidings, but what's the use, after the show has left town?"

"What do the company think?" demanded Peter. Birmy grinned.

"Those who scored personal hits think it's a great play. Those who didn't think it's rotten. And, of course, Tom Colt thinks his part could stand a lot of expanding. His idea of a good play is where he has all the lines and situations and the rest of the company come in now and then with 'yes' and 'no' and 'Here comes Tom Colt! Hurray!' "

"What do *you* think?"

"It's all right, Son," replied Birmingham, hastily. "On our left we see the historical capitol, where Jeff Davis presided over the destinies of the Lost Cause."

"You are dodging my question," persisted Peter, with a sinking heart.

"No, Son, no, I ain't. I said it was all right. What it needs is proper direction. Dan De Freece is a false alarm, if you leave it to me, but, then, bein' a director myself, maybe I'm prejudiced. Ain't those magnolias pretty? Funny how Dan gets his bluff over with a wise lad like Ben Straus. He'll get next to him some day."

The expert of the Richmond morning paper found "The Winning Smile" to be excellently constructed, blessed with crisp and witty lines, showing the practised hand of the experienced dramatist, but lacking in the elusive quality known as human interest. In short, it was very good—but.

Peter was bewildered. Either the Norfolk man or the Richmond man was a silly ass. He sighed and settled himself to await the verdict of the Washington man.

On the hot ride up to the National Capital Peter managed to cut off Marguerite from her feminine companions. She was fluttering and nervous at the success of his maneuver. Giving him no opportunity to get in more than a word or so, she began chattering at a great rate.

"Isn't Richmond a dear old place?" she asked, and did not wait for a reply. "Sort of a religious dignity it has, an aristocratic bearing, like a reigning family a wee little bit out at the elbows. It's impressive and pathetic, isn't it, and, oh, did you catch that laugh in the third act last night where the little blonde cutie upset the vase and the lost note came out? My part is a perfect gem, but I wish you'd cut out that sarcastic speech at

the finish where Beecher is suffering from remorse. It takes sympathy away from me and doesn't help Beecher any and I made up my mind I'd speak to you about it the first chance I got."

Marguerite paused to swallow and get her breath and Peter jumped in.

"You've been advoiding chance after chance!" he declared, "and you'd have dodged me now, only I was too quick for you. Many thanks for the suggestion about the sarcastic line; it is quite the best thing in the entire play. What I want to know, Old Dear, is: How about it?"

Marguerite looked innocently mystified.

"No use pretending," growled Peter, who was out of humor. "I propounded a rather important question some eons ago, if you remember——"

"Oh, that," said Marguerite, uneasily. "Can't you forget you said it and let things be as they were before?"

Peter was unable to oblige.

"Well, then," she said, firmly, "you must give me time to think. I won't be rushed."

"Can't you say 'yes' or 'no'? Right now, I mean?"

"You know what I told you that night. I don't believe I'll ever marry you."

"Yes, but you said that wasn't final."

"Want me to make it final, here and now?"

Marguerite was beginning to look rebellious.

"Tell me this," insisted Peter. "Do you love me?"

"None of your business, sir, she said," replied Marguerite, tormentingly. "Give me time, won't you? Do you realize that you are proposing in a day coach, and the last time you proposed on a curbstone?"

"When may I have the privilege of a private interview, then?" asked Peter stiffly.

"When we get back to New York," replied Mar-

guerite promptly. "Then we can get off by ourselves, quietly, and have it out once and for all. Don't be cross, Peter; it doesn't become you."

Miss Baldwin swayed down the aisle. The roadbed had its shortcomings.

"Oh, Carrie, darling!" Marguerite hailed her. "Friend Author was just saying how wonderful you are in that second act scene—come, sit down. Peter, get up like a good boy and run along. I've something to say to Carrie."

Peter ran along, a feeling of disappointment in his breast. Disappointment in Marguerite. She had been guilty of an unpardonable falsehood! He had said nothing whatever about Miss Baldwin being wonderful in that second act scene. And why couldn't she give him an answer? What was there to think about? No necessity of thinking. He had done that. Hang it all, she'd betrayed her feelings often enough; otherwise he would not have spoken. He began to regard himself as a benefactor whose benefaction is not appreciated at its true worth. Indubitably Peter was cross.

Washington on a Sunday is not the most exciting place on the North American continent. Excursionists it has who have sat up all night in crowded special trains for the privilege of gaping at the Washington monument and the capitol and the outside of the White House and administration buildings. But aside from the touch of color and flutter contributed by the excursionists, Washington folds itself up in gentle Sabbath slumber, locks itself in and does not get started again until 9 o'clock Monday morning.

On this particular Sunday it rained.

There was no rehearsal, nowhere to go and nothing to do. Peter admitted to himself that he had the pip.

Birmingham hung on to his trail like a St. Bernard dog. He did not say so, but Birmy felt that he needed a drink to dispel his gloom and hanging on to Peter was the safest thing to do. Even in Washington one could get a drink if one knew a club member and Birmingham knew several. And there was Baltimore, only an hour away.

So Birmingham clung tightly to Peter and was nervously loquacious. He remembered anecdotes of his early days in the sticks. He told professional stories and retailed professional scandal. Peter yawned and half-listened, peevishly pining for solitude.

"Did you hear the one about Wilton Lackaye and Bob Poole?" asked Birmy, and Peter seemed to recall having heard it, but this did not discourage the loquacious one.

"It seems Bob stopped Wilton on Broadway and says to him: 'I hear you told Lee Shubert I was a rotten actor,' just like that. And Lackaye looked Bob over in that way of his and drawls: 'I did not tell Lee Shubert you were a rotten actor. I thought he knew it.' "

Peter yawned and stretched.

"And what did Bob say to that?" he asked, politely.

Birmingham grunted and looked sad.

"If you ain't the human limit, Son," he complained. "And yet you got a sense of humor tucked away somewhere. You write bright stuff. But sometimes you remind me of the chappie from dear ol' London who was over here and heard a lot of vaudeville gags slamming Yonkers. He couldn't laugh at 'em for an obvious reason, but finally he worked up enough interest to ask a fellow, 'I say, what are yonkers?' "

"I've wondered myself," said Peter, quietly, "what are they?"

Birmingham rose with a baleful glare and went to the

ice water cooler. He emptied the penny-in-the-slot cup three times, felt his craving diminish and returned.

"Oh, well," he yawned, "in a couple of hours the New York papers will be here and then we'll be saved."

The house was filled to capacity. Word reached back stage that the President had said he might drop in Thursday, but commanded that nothing be given out about it. There were members of the diplomatic corps in the boxes, an air of summer finery in the orchestra and a general atmosphere of expectancy out in the lobby, where Ben Straus and his boon-yachting companions were watching the audience come in.

When the first act curtain rose Peter, for lack of a seat, stood back of the orchestra rail and watched proceedings from there. It was a quick audience, right on the trigger. It grasped everything that was offered and gave immediate response. It did not applaud, except on Tom Colt's entrance, but it laughed and gave gratifying attention. The first act curtain, with the beatific Tom wondering sweetly in the sunset, was followed by much handclapping. The delighted company took three bows and scattered to their dressing rooms, humming and smiling. It looked like a sure fall engagement unless cast changes were made.

Three more calls at the end of the second act and a call for Colt and Marguerite after the final curtain concluded a hearty first-night reception, for it was regarded in the light of a first night. Norfolk and Richmond were just public dress rehearsals. Peter was back stage when the final curtain fell and intercepted Marguerite on her way to her dressing room.

"Come out for a nice little supper," he suggested. "I'll wait."

Marguerite looked startled and perplexed.

"I—I promised Tom Colt," she stammered and Peter, coldly furious, said, "Oh, very well," and turned on his heel with a stiff raising of his hat. She disappeared. Miss Nora Maguire, who was not on at the finish, was emerging from her room and walking briskly toward the alley exit. Peter did a bit of quick thinking. By Jove, it was a game two could play at. He could jolly well make Marguerite sorry. He intercepted Miss Maguire and invited her to join him in a little supper. She looked at him, quizzically.

"Run along, Sonny, and behave yourself," she replied. "Marguerite is a dear, sweet girl and I don't want her in my hair. If ever a lady-love was true blue," she went on, earnestly, "she is. All she talks about is Peter Millard. She talks, thinks, eats, drinks, sleeps and dreams Peter Millard and what a wonderful man he is. Let me give you a tip. She's dying to have you make it up with her." Miss Maguire gave him a nod and a wink. "Go to it," she advised, "and both of you be happy."

She left Peter staring. Her version, he reflected, was certainly not borne out by Marguerite's recent behavior. But if *that* was the way she felt, he was doubly determined to repay her for her unbearable coquetry. At this point the pretty little blonde neophyte with the six-words part and the yearning for a nice man to take an interest in her career came into view. Peter remembered and was about to ask her to supper when he saw her join Jimmie, of the plastered hair. Evidently she had found the nice man she sought.

And now Carrie Baldwin was emerging from her dressing room, looking glum. Just the one! thought Peter.

"Whither away?" he called cheerily and Carrie turned and stared at him gravely.

"Hotel, I guess," she replied, dully. "I'm all in and have a terrific headache."

"Too bad. I was going to suggest a little bite and a small bottle. Celebration, you know. Just us two."

"Oh, well——" Carrie hesitated and was lost. She was as hungry as a bear. "I turned Tom down when he asked me after the second act," she lied, shrugging her shoulders. Peter knew that she was fibbing. They were two rejected, humiliated souls and they proceeded to join forces and be very gay about it. They followed the mob to the favorite supper place of the moment. A good many of the recent audience were there and soon Tom and Marguerite came in and sat at a nearby table which had been reserved. The two couples greeted each other with elaborate cordiality across the floor space which separated them. Tom's smile was genuine, there was that to be said for it. Little Carrie had been rather overdoing the possessive case and this was his declaration of independence.

Carrie now proceeded to flirt outrageously with Peter. It startled him a bit, but he quickly decided that she was acting for the benefit of the perfidious Tom and he did his best to respond, which was not very good. As a gay Lothario he was not a shining success, being much too genuine for the rôle. But Carrie was expert enough for them both. The coy way she brushed his hand with her finger tips, flashed saucy smiles at him and pretended prettily to blush, as if his commonplaces were freighted with hidden seductive meanings, led Peter to the reflection that she was a better actress off-stage than on.

Meanwhile Carrie was doing some practical thinking as she pouted and smiled and looked tender and gay. He was certainly good looking and an honest light in his blue eyes betokened sincerity. He was a playwright,

too. It was worth while to have a playwright on your string, especially one who was on the point of arriving. Probably not much of a dancer, but strong and athletic looking. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a part especially written for one; a part that brought out all one's best points! Tom was a conceited and selfish pig and was not to be depended on. He always wanted the best of it. She'd never get anywhere as far as he was concerned. But success hadn't spoiled Peter, as yet; he was a nice, simple English easy mark. She could make him eat out of her hand if she played her cards right. And in this business a girl must look out for herself all right, all right.

Had Peter known what was going on in her ingenuous little head he would have been tempted to bolt. But they were merely playing a silly little game to make Marguerite—and incidentally Colt—jealous. No harm in that. They didn't mean it, of course.

They were conveyed to Carrie's hotel in an open "hack" of Victorian origin. On the way she squeezed his hand, which wasn't necessary, Marguerite and Colt not being present to see it. Probably it was the champagne. She'd taken a wee bit more than her share.

"I've always longed to go down to Mount Vernon," she was saying. "Of course, you've been there dozens of times."

"On the contrary," replied Peter, wishing she'd let go of his moist hand, "this is my first experience in Washington. Never been here before."

"Oh," she cooed. "Let's go! How about to-morrow morning? No rehearsal and no matinee."

It was arranged. Peter drove to his hotel feeling vaguely uneasy. Well, thank goodness, he reflected, she did not have the predatory instincts of a Helen.

That is—he *thought* not. In the lobby he encountered Birmingham, waiting for him.

"I say, old Chap," sang out Peter, thrilled by an idea, "have you ever been to Mount Vernon?"

"Sure," said Birmingham. "I helped to write it."

"Then come with us to-morrow. You'll make a splendid guide."

"Want to see where your cousin George used to live, hey? Oh, excuse me, I got 'em mixed. It was Cousin Millard Fillmore. I'm with you. Where do we pick up Marguerite?"

"Marguerite isn't coming," said Peter. "It was Carrie Baldwin who suggested it."

Birmingham's prominent eyebrows went up and then came down, but his only comment was a grunt.

Peter went to bed and slept like a top, for he was very comfortable in his mind. The play had gone over better than he had hoped. He had maneuvered rather cleverly, he thought, in getting Birmy to act as a chaperon and protect him against further hand-squeezing. He hadn't a thing to worry about. The episode of Marguerite and Tom Colt was already forgotten; so he slept like a top.

Carrie Baldwin, excellent actress though she was, could not conceal a passing look of dismay when Peter called for her the following morning with Reginald Birmingham in tow as assistant cavalier. During the first half hour of the trip she was inclined to be cross, but she reasoned that Mr. Birmingham had just naturally horned in and that poor Peter couldn't help it.

There were three bridal couples on the boat and if Carrie had had her way the passengers might easily have guessed wrongly that there were four. Even at that, one calculating maiden lady figured it out that her

father had tagged along and felt sorry for the poor little thing.

Peter tried to be impressed by the historic associations of Mount Vernon, but made rather a mess of it. The boasted great age of the stuffy little mansion created in him no proper awe. In his own youth he had lived for a time in a house of the Queen Anne period. He mentioned that circumstance.

"You can't expect to excite a real Englishman much by showing him a house built in 1764," chuckled Birmingham. "Most of 'em have ridden in hansom cabs older than that, eh, Old Top?"

They got back to Washington in the late afternoon and dined, all three together, at a famous old restaurant where Peter was introduced to his first shad roe. He decided that he didn't care much for it; too deucedly like eating birdshot.

When he stepped into the theater that evening, just at ringing-in time, he sustained a distinct shock. The house was less than half filled. The man on the door had ample time for chatting. He pointed out that it was a warm evening. It had been even warmer the night before, Peter reflected. Mr. Bloom was inclined to take a gloomy view of it.

"If they don't want it, they won't come," was his philosophical comment.

After the first act Peter saw Ben Straus in the lobby in earnest conversation with a heavy-set, bored-looking man who wore rimless spectacles. He was about to approach when he caught an expression in Straus' eyes which held him back. The expression indicated plainly that Peter's company was not immediately desirable. He wandered back to the society of the man on the door, who, in the pause between giving out return checks and

receiving them back again, was regarding the producer and his companion with amused curiosity.

"Well," said the man on the door, cheerfully, to Peter, "I see they got the famous Dr. Ericson down to look over the patient."

Peter started, involuntarily.

"Ericson?" he asked, dully; "Is that Halmer Ericson?"

"It sure is," replied the man on the door, proud of his knowledge. "I reckon they think your show needs fixin'."

Peter went into the auditorium, an empty feeling in his stomach. So the play was wrong, after all! They were going to have that ass tinker with it and patch it up and ruin it. He needed the support of Marguerite or Birmingham and made his way back stage, where he ran into Carrie Baldwin.

"Wait for me after the show," she whispered to him, squeezing his arm as he passed and giving him no opportunity to reply.

He found Birmingham and blurted out his disastrous news:

"Halmer Ericson's out in front. What does that mean?"

"I heard he was in town," replied Birmingham, promptly. "There's a lame show over at the Lafayette that he's come down to have a look at."

"There's a lame show right here," retorted Peter. "Come out of it, Old Chap; you can't spoof me like that."

"Ah—say, now——" began Birmingham, but Peter had the floor.

"Last night, capacity. To-night, nothing. I know what it means. The first nighters raised the merry old

roof, called you out and showered you with applause and then went away and ripped the whole blessed thing. I wasn't born yesterday, you know. 'The Winning Smile' is a flop."

"All it needs is decent direction," insisted Birmingham, but Peter, beyond the power of consolation, stalked out of the theater through the stage door and was half way to his hotel when he remembered that Carrie Baldwin had asked him to wait for her. Wanted to see him after the show. What about, in God's name? Rotten nuisance, but he hadn't said he would not wait. Sullenly he retraced his steps. One thing was certain. He wasn't going to permit Carrie to vamp him. She was acquiring the habit of pawing one—rather Helenesque. He wouldn't submit to it, absolutely not.

It was in this unpropitious frame of mind that Miss Baldwin found him when she waltzed gaily out of her dressing room after the performance.

"No supper tonight," she said, brightly, taking familiar possession of his arm, "but let's go somewhere where we can talk. Some quiet place. How's the ladies' parlor at your hotel?"

"I don't know," replied Peter, shortly. "I haven't been in it." What the deuce did she want to talk about?

"Crosspatch!" said Carrie, looking up at him. "Well, come to my hotel, then. I can't ask you up to my room; they're terribly particular."

"I should hope so," said Peter.

They passed through the stage door, Carrie hanging to his arm, just as Marguerite emerged from her dressing room. She stood with hands on hips looking after them.

"Well——" said Marguerite.

"It's a lovely night," cooed Miss Baldwin, in the alley. "Let's walk." They walked.

"Now, then," she began, as they sat side by side on a stuffed lounge, at the end of their walk, "I have a perfectly gorgeous idea for a corking play. Smile, bad boy, and show your nice teeth. Aren't you glad I've a gorgeous idea for a corking play?"

"Charmed," sighed Peter. "But I have yet to meet anyone who hasn't. And all it needs is writing, what? Nothing but that. Child's play."

"But," insisted Miss Baldwin, "this one is GOOD."

She looked swiftly about. They were alone in the great room. She bounced up on the springs and give him a flying peck of a kiss on the cheekbone. It tickled, just as Marguerite's peck on the back of his neck had tickled that time. He recalled the similarity.

"That's to make you behave nice and listen," she cooed, prettily.

She all but cuddled, she sat so close. Peter groaned in spirit, but he was, he hoped, a gentleman, so he did not move away, as he was impelled to, but stood, or rather, sat, to his guns.

Miss Baldwin outlined her gorgeous idea at length. It had to do with a simple young girl of superhuman goodness, whose noble efforts to alleviate the suffering of everybody else in the cast were sadly misunderstood, but who persisted in her angelic ministrations until she won a Prince and the entire cast of characters smirked adoringly at her when she stood, richly attired in contrast with her earlier rags, with the Prince at her side at the final curtain. The detail omitted not one of Carrie's box of tricks. She got hold of his hand during the recital. He was most uncomfortable.

"What do you think of it?" she asked, breathlessly, in conclusion.

"I think," replied Peter, slowly, "that if I were to

write what you have just told me, the author of 'Pollyanna' would have legitimate cause for legal action."

"But it's not a bit like Pollyanna!"

"No? I fancied it was, with just a touch of 'The Road to Happiness' and a suggestion of 'Peg of My Heart.'"

"Well, of course, it would require a different treatment. What's got into you to-night, Peter? You're not a bit the sweet, lovable big boy I've come to——" She broke off, in confusion. Her pretty eyes filled.

"You're not going to disappoint me I hope? We're —pals, aren't we?"

"Oh, yes, indeed," said Peter. "By all means, of course, we're pals."

What the deuce else could he say?

CHAPTER XIX.

PETER EXPERIENCES A DEFINITE "FLOP" AND AN EQUALLY DEFINITE REJECTION. IMMINENCE OF AN EXPLOSION.

NO distinguished visitor from the White House dropped in on Thursday. The weather continued pleasant and the audiences shrank almost to the vanishing point. Peter did not again see Halmer Ericson, but learned that he had flown back to Broadway. On the subject of Ericson he straightway tackled Ben Straus.

"I have been reading over my contract," he informed him, "and I find that while I am required to make such changes and alterations as may be reasonable and necessary, there is nothing in it about a rank outsider being permitted to come in and have a hack at my play."

Mr. Straus elevated meek eyebrows and shoulders as one who would ask what of it.

"I saw Halmer Ericson here recently," said Peter, "and it appeared to me to be a bit—ah—significant."

"Mr. Ericson dropped in to see your little play and found it very interesting," admitted Mr. Straus with a smile. "He said you were a comer and had a nice sense of satire and sound knowledge of construction. I assure you Mr. Ericson was very complimentary. You should be proud."

"And he isn't going to mull over the script?"

"Not with a ten-foot pole will he touch your script," said Ben Straus, emphatically.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Such changes as are needed would be made by you, Mr. Millard. When we get back to New York our Mr. De Freece will take it up with you some day. The cast must be strengthened. Baldwin won't do. Sweet little girl, but lacks finesse. And Maguire is hard as nails, we think. No sympathy."

"Then you intend to do the play in the fall?"

"What a question! It stands us twenty thousand dollars to date. I ask you, would I throw away twenty thousand dollars?"

Peter was satisfied. His play was not to be carved up by alien hands and it was to be put to the Broadway test.

Because he wanted to avoid Miss Baldwin he kept away from back stage and thereby missed some interesting gossip. He "did" Washington quite thoroughly and spent one morning in the Senate gallery, to which he climbed expecting to be impressed, but was only disillusioned. Snuffy old duffers, they were; not much of an improvement on the House of Lords. He went up the Washington Monument and through the great printing plant, and thrilled at the ornate interior of the Congressional Library and took long walks and went through the usual stereotyped experiences of the visitor to Washington.

To escape Miss Baldwin the more effectively he left Washington on Friday at midnight, having scribbled a short note to Marguerite, in which he asked her to telephone him on her return. He felt rather like a coward running away from danger, but better that than the peril of Carrie. He had his first experience of a sleeping car and found it most interesting. Fearfully promiscuous, though, this morning wash in the smoking cubby, or whatever they called it. And he ran into some ladies

bound in the opposite direction, who were not nearly as embarrassed as he.

The following day being Saturday he strolled down in the evening to the Community Playhouse to collect a matter of two weeks' royalties, but found the place closed. It made him feel as if he had been absent from New York for ages. At the Dutchman's he learned that a hot wave had shriveled business at the little theater to such an extent that on last Wednesday evening the audience had numbered not many more than a dozen. They were politely dismissed on a mendacious plea of illness in the cast and the season came to an abrupt close.

On Monday, bright and early, Marguerite telephoned. She was willing to be invited out to luncheon and called him "darling" twice during the conversation. They met at the appointed restaurant and it seemed almost like a reunion. She did not behave at all as if she had been eluding him, but was chatty and chummy in the good old way. There was a lively exchange of news and gossip. Peter told her of the abrupt closing down in the Village and her face fell.

"There goes whatever back royalty they owe you," she said. "You'll never pry it from Levanski now. How much was it?"

"Matter of a hundred and fifty," replied Peter, frowning.

Marguerite had much to tell him about little happenings in the company on the closing night and on the trip home.

"By the way," she exclaimed in a spirit of raillery. "What in the world did you do to little Carrie Baldwin? She went about acting as if her nearest and dearest had died. You went and stole her heart, didn't you?"

"Nothing of the sort," he retorted, flushing. "She had

a silly idea for a play in her mind and I couldn't see my way clear to writing it."

"It was more than that that made her act the way she did," commented Marguerite. "Peter, you're a fascinating lady-killer."

"I'm not," he replied, brusquely. "I don't bother my head about them."

"That's the secret of your success," she announced. "You don't bother your head about them, so they have to go and bother their heads about you in self-defense. Take the case of Carrie Baldwin——"

"Come out of it," he pleaded, flushing. "She was merely paying out Tom Colt—and, by the by, Colt seemed to be rushing you rather, didn't he?"

"Only up to Friday night," she replied, demurely.

"Why only up to Friday night?"

"On Friday night I slapped his pretty face for him and he didn't seem to like it very well."

Peter glowered.

"The beast!" he muttered. "If I had been there——"

"I'm glad you weren't. I can take care of myself, Peter Boy. My palm still tingles and he won't smile his wonderful smile again for a week. Did him good; took some of the conceit out of him."

"Why did you lead him on and avoid me?"

"Now—now—forbidden ground!" she warned him.

"We are back in New York and you know you promised when we were back in New York that you would honor me with your answer to my question——"

"Oh, cut out the formalities. I know what I promised. Well, take me up to your diggings and we'll have it out, once and for all."

She was suddenly nervous and uneasy and hardly spoke in the taxi.

"Well?" he demanded, when they had reached his rooms and seated themselves.

"Repeat your proposition," said Marguerite, looking steadily at him.

"You know what it is. Why repeat it?"

"Because I ask you to. I've a good reason for it."

He felt a sense of injustice and impatience at her silly whim, so, of course, he proceeded to make a mess of things.

"As you may perchance recall," said Peter, blandly, "on a recent occasion and after due deliberation, I asked you to become my wife—to—in short, I asked you to marry me."

"Yes?" Marguerite was gazing at him as if waiting, eager, for something that had not yet been forthcoming. Peter was puzzled.

"Well," he said. "You appeared to deem the time and the place inapropos. In fact, you laughed at me. Later on I repeated my proposal and again you found occasion for mirth and pointed out that a public railway car was scarcely the proper setting for—ah—a proposal of marriage."

Peter thrust an impatient finger inside his collar, which was pinching him. Marquerite seemed still waiting for that something.

"So here, amid surroundings which, you must yourself admit, have every attribute of privacy, I ask you once more if you will honor me by becoming my wife."

He paused and looked at her inquiringly. Her expression still puzzled him. What in the world did she expect?

"Is that all you have to say?" she asked, a little catch in her voice.

"It appears to cover the ground," replied Peter.

"Very well, then." Her attitude suddenly became grim and business-like. "My answer is what I've all along thought it was going to be——"

"You mean?——" interrupted Peter.

"No. You are not the man for me and I am not the girl for you."

"I am sorry you think so," he replied, icily.

"You're not sorry!" she cried. "You know in your heart of hearts that what I say is so. I feel honored by your proposal, Peter, but it did not come from your soul. Your soul has never been touched at all."

"Much you know about my soul," he muttered, hurt by her rejection.

"More than you do," she smiled sadly. "It has never been awakened. You have never really loved——"

"If I haven't, I never shall."

"Don't talk nonsense. Of course, you will. But I'm not the one to do the trick. Love! You don't know what it means. Shall I tell you some bitter truths? Well, Birmy and I were talking it over and the reason 'The Winning Smile' flopped is the reason I am telling you 'no.' You haven't got hold of life, yet. You're a cynic. And you're a cynic because you don't know any better. It's the only way you can express yourself. Birmy calls it a disease of youth——"

"You and Birmy seem to have talked me over pretty thoroughly," interrupted Peter, offended. "And as for 'The Winning Smile' being a flop, it goes on, after due fixing in the autumn. Straus told me so."

"Oh," said Marguerite, with a quick glance at him, "did he?"

"But go on," apologized Peter. "What else did you and Birmy decide?"

"That you are soul of honor and a paragon of chivalry,

cleaner than a hound's tooth and purer than driven snow."

"I don't think the occasion calls for spoofing," protested Peter, flushing.

"Oh, you perfectly delightful damn fool!" cried Marguerite, out of patience. "Yes, glare at me if you want to, but I'll say it all I like. I am outside the Peter influence. I'll tell you what we decided: That you have a great future once you've come alive, but before you can accomplish anything better than little one-act gems of bitter wit, you will have to live, love and suffer, and by living I don't mean three meals a day; by loving I don't mean anything that you'd understand and by suffering I don't mean the toothache."

"Too bad you didn't call attention to my shortcomings before I tackled the play," he muttered.

"I didn't know about them. I hadn't thought it out, but Birmy had. He said he warned you. It takes an audience to show you what a play is. We two were so busy listening to the click of the perfect machinery and appreciating the wit of the lines that we overlooked the big point, the human interest. Honest, Dear, after the second act nobody cares what becomes of your characters, they're all such rotters. If you ended with an earthquake that swallowed 'em all up, nobody would be sorry for them. They're a pack of sententious bright-wits, perfectly correct and perfectly contemptible. Now you have it."

Peter thought it over, gloomily. Her heart ached for him. She wanted to hug his blond head to her bosom and croon over him. He thought it over, soberly and carefully and the sum of his thoughts was this:

"The salient point of it all seems to be that you don't care for me."

"Care for you!" she cried, a tormented note in her voice. "I would crawl to hell on my bare knees for you, but I won't marry you! You are too cold. I won't eat out my everlasting heart for nothing and that's what marrying you would doom me to. You would never thaw to me; you never have. I've always been able to see right through you. The reason you proposed to me was because you thought I was crazy about you. Well, I was crazy about you, but you're not that way about me and you never will be. It wouldn't be fair. I don't propose to do all the loving! The man I marry has got to be wild about me, do you hear? Wild about me! Now perhaps you see what I mean. Also perhaps you don't."

Peter's emotions were strangely mixed. This combination of dramatic criticism and personal comment directed at his limitations in the matter of ardor had him sadly bewildered. Out of the maze two ideas loomed forth. The first to the effect that "The Winning Smile" was hopeless and the second that she was most certainly not going to marry him. The fish was definitely not hooked.

Marguerite rose and looked about for her vanity bag. Peter entered a weak plea of self-defense. As she reached the door, he said:

"Really, you know, you expect too much of me. I fear that being crazy and wild and all that sort of thing has been left out of my system. I shall never be like that."

"Yes, you will," she insisted, with a sad smile, "and when you are you will be a complete and finished human being. It is going to take that to make you write a real play. Pray that it happens to you soon, before you dry up and get to be hopeless. It's going to take a tre-

mendous explosion to jar you, Peter Boy, but, believe me, you'll be jarred some day."

Her hand was on the knob. She looked at him with a great sadness in her eyes.

"I'll tell you why I asked you to go through it again," she said in a low voice. "I wanted to be able to say 'yes' and I gave you another chance. God help me, Peter, but I would have been in your arms if you had only just said the words, 'I love you,' but you didn't."

"Oh, by Jove—I say—" stuttered Peter, suddenly realizing his ghastly omission, his blundering, idiotic, ghastly——

But the door had closed and she had gone. Even then he did not appreciate the temptation she had resisted to the death; the temptation to possess him and twine herself into his life and squander her great passion on him and ruin them both.

Peter waited patiently for a fortnight, hoping to hear from De Freece or Ben Straus. Then he called at the Straus offices. Mr. De Freece was out, the future magnate announced with a gleam of vicious triumph, and Mr. Straus was in conference. He could leave a message.

"Just say that I called," murmured Peter, and departed. It began to look as if Marguerite had been right about the flop. Still, he tinkered with his copy of the script, trying to infuse a bit of sympathy into the characters she had maligned. It was hard work. He missed his secretary. He couldn't ask her to work for him ever any more. Devilish shame; he was used to her and she was used to him.

It got to be late July and still no word from Straus. Not a peep from Kalmann, either, by Jove. He called on Kalmann, half expecting to be turned away with some

excuse, but he was admitted. Mr. Kalmann was up to his ears in preparations for the coming season, he explained. Had two pieces in rehearsal. He hadn't reached "The Fifth Wheel" yet. He must clear his decks first. He would notify Mr. Millard's agent when anything was stirring. Oh, surely, he intended to do "The Fifth Wheel" and when he got to it. His handshake was cordial, but Peter was not asked to drop in again. That hint about notifying the agent was sufficient.

Restless and unhappy, he returned to "The Winning Smile" and saw Marguerite's point of view. The characters *were* rotters, as a matter of fact, but then life was like that. Sentimental slush might do for servant girls and butcher boys. Still, there might be some happy medium. He put his pride in his pocket and decided to telephone Marguerite, acknowledging the correctness of her views and asking for coöperation in revising the script. He got the number, but not Marguerite, who, it appeared from her landlady, had gone west in Summer stock—Indianapolis, or Cleveland, or St. Paul, some such place. That was that. She hadn't bothered to say goodbye. It was the end, as far as they were concerned.

Paragraphs were making their appearance announcing the plans of the Broadway producers. Straus' plans appeared and they included some twenty-seven productions, of which "The Winning Smile" was not one. Kalmann's list of forthcoming enterprises was published. Not a word about "The Fifth Wheel." Peter felt forsaken and injured.

On a hot July afternoon he almost touched shoulders with Carrie Baldwin on Broadway and was about to doff his straw hat, but Carrie gave him the cut direct. It was his day for running into people. He ran into Moe Levanski, who performed an eel-like maneuver and es-

caped into an office building. "Hundred and fifty dollars," thought Peter, and, curiously enough, the same thought was in Levanski's mind, but from a different angle.

Then he caught sight of Birmy, who neither dodged nor cut him, but was tremendously glad to see "the boy" and actor-like stood stock still in the middle of the sidewalk, while the passing tide eddied by impatiently. They had not met since Washington and Birmy was full of news about an engagement he had landed through the good offices of Ericson, who had liked his work that time he'd caught him in Washington.

"Then you're not going with 'The Winning Smile,'" said Peter, faintly. Birmingham looked away, uneasily, and replied that nobody had asked him to. At this point a big policeman interrupted with the good-natured suggestion that they move up-stage and give the pedestrians a chance. They walked on together and Peter expressed fears regarding "The Winning Smile." He said he could get no information about it from the Straus offices in spite of repeated calls.

"That's the curse of the show business," declared Birmingham, "this stalling and passing the buck.

"Some day," said Birmingham, "a guy is coming along who will be able to say 'yes' and 'no,' and he'll revolutionize the theatrical game. But about your lil' show, Son; didn't you know?"

"Know what?"

"The production went straight from Washington to Caine's storehouse." Caine's well-known storehouse was the yawning graveyard of flops, busts and flivs, as Peter knew. He gave up his last lingering hope.

"Straus told me——" he began, but stopped. What difference did it make what Straus had told him? "Didn't

Ericson go to Washington to look the show over?" he asked, after a pause.

"Something like that," murmured Birmy. "He told me the only way to fix the piece was to throw away the script and write another one on the same subject and he didn't feel like doing that. He thought it would make a corking library play—something to put in a book—but the way you had your characters handing nasty remarks to each other made the audience hate the whole bunch."

"Marguerite said something like that," mused Peter. "By the way, how is dear lil' Marguerite?"

"Haven't seen her for an age," replied Peter. "I heard she went west in Summer stock."

"That so? I understand she's got a fall engagement with 'A Devil of a Fellow,'" Birmingham volunteered, "so she'll be back before long."

"That's a Straus production, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied Birmingham. "De Freece told me it was just naturally made for Marguerite. He expects to feature her if she gets over in this one. Says she has the makings."

They strolled up the street aimlessly. Peter was in a blue funk, all his props knocked from under him. Birmingham was uneasy, but sympathetic.

"Well," he asked at length, "what's next on the programme? Writing anything?"

"Why should I?" burst out the stricken Peter. "I'm a flossy failure. They won't even let me into the Straus offices, and I'm cut dead on the street.

"No!" exclaimed Birmingham, shocked.

"Only a moment ago Carrie Baldwin passed me, nose in the air. Of course, she'd heard about it."

"Oh, that don't count," cried Birmingham, breathing

a sigh of relief. "You can't blame lil' Carrie. She tagged you good and proper and you wouldn't be 'it' and play her game. Hell hath no fury like a passed-up ingenue, as Bill Shakespeare says."

They had reached Columbus Circle. Birmingham suggested that they sit in the park awhile.

"Say, Son," he observed, as they took a shady seat, "I don't want you to flare up and bite me, but how are you fixed? Need any mon'? There—there—my fingers are crossed! 'Fen glaring! I only wanted to know. I got a swell engagement and a husky roll and I guess I don't have to tell you my shirt is yours if you need it."

"Thanks, Old Man," said Peter. "It's fearfully good of you, but I have money."

"All right, glad to hear it," grinned Birmingham. "No harm done. Now about this flossy failure thing. Don't make me laugh. Your foot slips just once and you want to quit cold. You'll come out of it and the sooner the quicker. Remember the B. C. and Siren shows. Both of 'em wows. Write some more like them. The lil' group of earnest workers will eat 'em up for you."

"Levanski made a quick dive when he saw me half an hour ago," announced Peter, bitterly.

"Owes you a lil' royalty, don't he? I thought so. Well, forgive him his sins and hand him a nice clean new script and he'll bite all right. I know a guy who'll take the B. C. piece for vaudeville—the Siren is too high-brow for Keith's—and that'll help some. Keep your head up and you'll come out on top. Feel better already, don't you, Son?"

Peter stretched a point for the sake of his friend and said he did. They dined together and spent an evening at an outlying summer park. Birmingham was to report for rehearsal the following morning.

"Remember, Kid," he said at parting, "all I got is yours. If it hadn't been for you digging me out of the Village I wouldn't be showing up to-morrow to get a nice fat part book and the wages that goes with it. And Marguerite wouldn't be on her way to a featured line on the programme. Failure? Gee Whiz, Son, she and I don't look at it that way, seeing what we got out of it!"

They arranged to meet for dinner that day week, but they did not again catch sight of each other for more than three years.

In the meantime Europe blew up. Marguerite had prophesied that it would take a tremendous explosion to jar Peter and, behold, even as she spoke the tremendous explosion was on the way.

CHAPTER XX.

PETER GOES ABROAD, WHERE HE HEARS THAT MARGUERITE IS MARRIED. THE EXPLOSION HAS ITS EFFECT ON BIRMY.

PETER had his first papers, but had not yet been invited to renounce the King of England and all his works, or to swear eternal fealty to the United States. As he read the first despatches from London and Brussels, he began to feel more and more like a Briton and less like a Yankee. He decided that the land of his birth needed him, while the land of his adoption was not using him any too well. He wished to Heaven that Uncle Sam would get into the scrimmage, but Uncle Sam, it seems, did not see it quite as Peter did. In the end he compromised. He took train for Montreal and enlisted under the symbol of the Maple Leaf. In no time at all he was on his way across the Atlantic cooped up in a crowded troopship.

This is in no sense a political history, but a personal chronicle, dealing principally with Peter Fillmore Millard's career as a scribbler of plays. During the four years from September, 1914, to November, 1918, Peter's career had nothing whatever to do with the scribbling of plays; he was otherwise employed and exceedingly busy at it.

The Lusitania was sunk and still Uncle Sam held off. Peter cursed the land that he had loved and rejoiced that he was not one of its skulking citizens. Other things

happened and finally Uncle Sam ceased from holding off and jumped into the fray with a dynamic enthusiasm that thrilled the world. Peter, hysterical for the first time in his young life, recanted his blasphemous curses and dug up his papers when the first American unit arrived. It took a lot of bother and red tape to get himself transferred to the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe, but he managed it and found himself top sergeant of Doughboys. He now ran into some chap from New York occasionally and, oh, how jolly it was to swap recollections of the dear old town! After all, there was only one New York.

It happened that one day Peter being in sore need of cigarettes and having the leisure and cash to supply his needs, hiked to the nearest supply station, which was a Knights of Columbus hut, and there he ran, slap-bang, into the very last person in the world.

Good Old Birmy, no less! Birmy in the flesh and hard as nails, was in charge of the hut. Birmy in a brand-new part, behind a counter selling chewing gum and smokes to those who had the price and giving them freely away to those who hadn't.

They shook hands. They clinched. They laughed aloud and slapped each other savagely on the back, so that it stung, and Birmy, unashamed, wept big tears and wiped his streaming eyes.

"You damn stiff-legged, son-of-a-sea-cook!" he blubbered. "You red-neck hunk of dough! Mop up your own map, dog-gone you! You're cryin' like a damn baby!"

Peter would have denied this, but found, inexplicably, that he was unable to articulate. So he punched Birmy in the shoulder and used the cuff of his uniform where it would do the most good.

"Gad," he muttered apologetically, "I don't know what's got into me."

"I do!" boomed Birmy. "You've turned human. It took a world war to do it, but we have not fought in vain! If good old Marguerite could see you this minute!"

"Good old Marguerite," echoed Peter. "A bit of all right, wasn't she, though!"

"Best lil' scout in the profession," agreed Birmy. "She's got it soft for the rest of her life. Guess who she married?"

"Married? Marguerite? MARRIED?"

"Probably got a baby by this time. What's the matter, Son? Gosh, you had your chance but passed it up. Yes, sir, when I left Broadway a coupla thousand years ago the word was bein' passed around that Marguerite and De Freece were gettin' ready to team up."

"No!" ejaculated Peter, suddenly, and limply sitting down. "How in the name of God did De Freece manage to keep out of the clouds long enough to propose! Are you SURE?"

"Dan told me so, himself," replied Birmingham, with conviction. "Said if it wasn't for that he'd be tempted to accept an engagement as Major, or Colonel and help stage-direct the war. You ought to have seen the blushin' bridegroom-to-be. Looked as if he didn't know what had struck him, and was glad of it. Dan was an old bach, you know. But he was following Marguerite around like an absent-minded lil' puppy dog, worshipping the ground she walked on. And she with her nose in the air, kind of enjoying it. Oh, well, a girl can do worse than marry a big director. And, say, remember Helen?"

Peter distinctly remembered Helen.

"Name's up in lights. Full-fledged star, with Broad-

way at her feet. They say Arthur Baildon has her hypnotized. Whatever it is, she's certainly some actorine. And you and I discovered her. Remember the time I called her a kike and she politely requested you to knock my block off? Them was the days. I wouldn't call her that now. She's shed her race with her name. Helen Raville, no less, and she's as fat as a match and looks like a thoroughbred."

"And Marguerite married De Freece," mused Peter. "Lucky duffer!"

"You said a mouthful."

"I beg pardon—a what?"

"A mouthful. That's the latest New York," explained Birmingham.

There was other news. The Community Players had broken up. Internal dissensions, or something. The loss of Peter, Birmy, Helen and Marguerite had sapped their vitality. Levanski had done some juggling with the books; stole a couple of thousand and sued them for a couple more on top of that. Then there was lil' Carrie —What's-her-name—Baldwin. She'd gone to the Coast in stock; did pretty well, too. Sued a rich ranchman for breach-of-promise and got into pictures on the strength of the publicity. Speaking of pictures, Birmy had seen "The Winning Smile" on the screen. New title—"Should she have Told?" or something.

This was indeed news to Peter. His contract gave him half of the picture and stock company takings. Birmingham had heard that the picture boobs had paid five thousand for the rights, in which event there were twenty-five hundred good American dollars awaiting his return home. Not so bad. The picture? No punker than usual. The fellow that played Birmingham's part hadn't got the idea at all and, of course, they had ruined

all the best scenes, but outside of that it wasn't such a bad picture.

Time was up. Peter had to return. He would be back in a couple of days. But in a couple of days Peter was having his teeth loosened by the jolts of an ammunition lorrie on his way to another sector and the K. C. hut had been gleefully located by Hun airmen, who found it a fine target to practice on. Their pleasantries cost Birmingham an arm and ruined his usefulness as an actor.

"Oh, well," said Birmingham, philosophically, when he had come out of the anæsthetic, "anyway my long suit is directing and outside of not bein' able to clap my hands for attention, I guess I'll make out."

Peter had marched up Fifth Avenue in tin hat and service equipment, been mustered out and had received his final papers which made him, by virtue of congressional amiability, a citizen of the United States. He found a studio apartment in the Village. The Village reminded him of Helen and Marguerite and that little snake Levanski, but he forgave Levanski. As well be indignant at a cootie. Peter had broadened. He thought wistfully and with something of an ache of Marguerite as a helpful pal who had passed out of his ken. He hoped she was happy with Dan De Freece, although what in God's name she could have seen in him to marry——

Birmy had said that De Freece worshipped the ground she walked on. Probably that was the explanation. He remembered how she had told him that the man she married must be wild about her——

Peter's return to civilian clothes and private life involved a good deal of activity. He had things to get out

of storage, first of all. Then he wrote to the Straus offices regarding the disposal of the picture rights of his play and in due course received a cheque for two thousand dollars, together with a statement showing that while five thousand had been paid by Inspired Intellect Pictures, Inc., there had been a matter of a thousand dollars in agents' fees, et cetera. He smiled, but accepted the statement and banked the two thousand, vowing not to touch a penny of it, but to keep it as an anchor to windward.

While he was finding himself he went several times to the theater. He saw Helen Raville in "The Michigoose," a comedy by somebody else and Arthur Baildon, in which Helen amazed him by the sheer wizardry of her light, ephemeral, comedy touch and thrilled him to tears in her one fine scene of pathos. She was slenderly beautiful, too, a wonderfully transformed Helen. He found himself wondering if her table manners had improved.

Marguerite, evidently, had dropped out of the profession. At any rate, she graced no Broadway cast. Domestic duties occupied her time, perhaps. He remembered that omelette of hers and the way she wiped dishes. Born housewife, but what she had seen in that ass, Dan De Freece——

Four years, he observed, had wrought tremendous changes. He dropped in at the Dutchman's, but Owgoost was gone and the free lunch boy was now in sole charge. Owgoost had died of a broken heart, it appeared. The new proprietor, Adolph, had grown amazingly in weight and dignity since the free lunch days. He was careful to mention several times during the conversation that he was a Swiss. Ever since 1914 it had been his habit to mention that. But Owgoost had been frankly German-American and had nephews in the Kaiser's armies.

The entrance into the war of the land of his adoption against the land of his birth had done for him; that and his kidneys. Adolph shook a sad and dignified head. Nothing was as it used to be any more. They were even talking prohibition. Going to take his beer away from the poor working man; as if business wasn't rotten enough as it was, with the Community Playhouse standing empty and idle. The between-acts rush had done much for the Dutchman's in the past.

Adolph sighed and looked dreamy and out of his dream came an idea.

"Why don't you and Mr. Birmingham get busy mit the theayter and open it up again, yet?" he asked. "You two was the brains of the place and while you was there everbody was happy and makin' money."

"Birmingham?" exclaimed Peter. "Is he back? Have you seen him?"

"Sure," replied Adolph. "Every now and then he comes in, but he's still on the vagon, yet. Seltzer, yes, but no beer or booze. Good beer never hurt nobody. In seltzer they say is marble dust."

"But, about Birmy!" Peter persisted. "Do you know where he hangs out? Have you his address? How does he look? Is he well?"

Adolph did not know the address, but he came in often. He looked well, all but the empty sleeve.

"Empty Sleeve?"

"Sure. He got his arm took off in the war."

"God!" cried Peter. "How did it happen?"

Adolph shrugged Swiss shoulders. How did anything happen in the damn war?

"A non-combatant," Peter marveled. "And he lost an arm, while I went through four years of it and didn't catch cold!"

At that moment Birmingham came in.

"Didn't I tell you!" cried Adolph, vindicated, and prepared to set 'em up.

Peter beamed and Birmy glowed.

"Thank God, you're back, Son!" sang Birmy. "And so am I. Just like old times."

"All but—this. I only just heard about it from Adolph."

"Oh—that!" said Birmingham with his old familiar sheepish grin, glancing at his empty right sleeve. "Just a lil' accident. How about you? All there? Nothin' missing—no leg, or arm——"

"I didn't even get my hair mussed," confessed Peter, ruefully.

They stood at the bar and drank seltzer with marble dust in it, while Adolph, as third member of the party in good standing, took small beers for his and treated whenever his turn came. The staccato exchange of experiences had begun to languish when Adolph brought up his idea regarding the revival of the Community Players.

"Fine!" said Birmingham. "What are we going to use for money?"

"I got a liddle money," said Adolph, modestly. "I wouldn't mind so much gambling mit you two boys. I got a brother-in-law who's a good lawyer. We might fix it up mit him."

Birmingham looked thoughtful and serious.

"Doesn't listen so bad, Son?" he said. "Got any lil' one-act gems in your suit case?"

Peter regretted that he had not.

"Easy to cook up a few," mused Birmingham. "With you as official playwright, me as director and Adolph as Angel, we'd stand a chance. Business is so good these days that even the failures are making money. And we

could spread a net down here and get a mess of actors and actoreens without half trying."

"But first," said Peter, "we must find some scripts. I can't furnish the whole bill. We need a change of pace."

They talked it over from every angle. Birmingham's enthusiasm grew as the idea developed. Adolph did the heavy listening and mentally figured the profits from the between-act rushes. A new relief bartender came on and Adolph doffed his apron and suggested dinner at the Samovar, around the corner. Word mysteriously got about in the Samovar that the Playhouse was going to open again. It spread to the Purple Jungle, the Peach-blossom tea room, the Garret and other resorts, and it was hailed with rejoicing, for the audiences which had formerly graced the performances at the Community Playhouse had been good spenders.

Dinner was over and emissaries from other places, dropping in for confirmation of the rumor, were grouped about the life-saving trio. Everybody was strongly for it. It couldn't possibly fail. Adolph, who had a head for business, as exemplified by his rise from free lunch boy to proprietor of the Dutchman's, suggested a liddle corporation, to be drawn up by his brother-in-law, who was a good lawyer, in which the enthusiasts might invest. This calmed some of the most exuberant, but did not drive away all of the motley bunch. Those who remained were solid citizens who had real money and some sense of showmanship. Leaders they were in the Village, which was itself a show. If shares were fixed at ten dollars they might take a few and they knew others who would be tickled silly to come in.

Adolph got his brother-in-law on the telephone and the good lawyer promised to take a taxi and hurry. At

this one or two loud talkers remembered engagements, but there still remained a handful of the faithful. Brother-in-law Otto, arriving on schedule time, laid the foundation of the Community Theater, Inc., and lined up an encouraging lot of small investors. One modest maid, who had been lighting new cigarettes from the butts of old ones all the evening, announced that she would take one share and pay cash for it if they would make her leading lady. Birmingham's rejoinder was candid and discouraging, but the modest maid borrowed another cigarette and stayed in the game.

Peter subscribed a hundred dollars and announced that Birmingham's subscription was the same. Birmy, flushing painfully through his tan, was about to make a confession of poverty when Peter looked him serenely in the eye and smiled.

"That is the figure you mentioned privately to me, I believe?" said Peter, and Birmingham, with a grunt subsided.

"I oughtn't to let you do it," he grumbled as they left the crazy restaurant together, but Peter recalled to him a conversation in Central Park some four years before and affectionately exhorted him not to make an ass of himself.

"Oh, all right, if you insist," murmured Birmy, "but there's one thing I got to say: This late lamented world war not only made the world safe for democracy and restored Alsace-Lorraine, but it's made a pretty good liar out of one Peter F. Millard. Wonders will never cease!"

Peter grinned in the dark.

CHAPTER XXI.

A SUCCESSOR TO MARGUERITE.

HIS task was to think up out of his rusty recesses an idea for a good one-act play. Then he must find a successor to Marguerite as amanuensis. Peter counted up his resources. His only income now was from the English estate and because of the fall in the exchange value of the pound sterling this was sadly reduced. The two hundred he had put into the corporation brought down his cash on hand to the danger mark. The two thousand in the savings bank he would not touch. Yet Peter had to have a secretary if he was to turn out living dialogue and not stereotyped speeches.

First of all he turned press agent and got out paragraphs announcing renewed activity and inviting authors to submit scripts. Scripts immediately commenced tumbling in by wholesale. Peter and Birmingham read twenty a day and out of every hundred, on an average, found one that might do. Mr. Lawrence Crane, whose defiance had originally turned Peter toward playwriting that evening ages ago, in the Dutchman's back room, made his appearance with a dainty little thing having to do with the venality of statesmen and the beauties of non-resistance to evil. He wore the same suit of clothes, apparently, and needed the same shave.

Mr. Crump, the artist with the impossible name, fortuitously popped up. He had been gathered in by the Straus offices shortly after De Freece had "caught" his

work for the Siren piece, but temperamental difficulties arose and Crump, scornfully rejecting riches and artistic slavery, went back to independence and a bare living.

Word went forth in the Village that talent was needed and talent responded to the extent of a dozen young men and a hundred young women. The former lady ushers, recalling what had been achieved by Helen Robbins, presented themselves in the new capacity of potential stars. Birmingham flatly rejected bobbed hair and this reduced the available material eighty per cent. Sadie Greenbaum was welcomed back on her promise to let hers grow. Mr. Levanski reappeared from nowhere, smiling and eager to resume guardianship of the treasury. He retired again with lacerated feelings.

"Ready for your lil' masterpiece, Son," announced Birmingham one bright March day, but Peter had no masterpiece. He had not yet found a secretary. Stenographers were still receiving war salaries and were scarce at that. Foreign service in the Y. M. and Red Cross had forever spoiled a lot of bright girls for office work, thousands of them. The outlook worried Peter. Oh, for Marguerite!

He visited agency after agency, but when he asked for a bright young woman to work on half-time for, say, twelve dollars a week, the lady managers lost interest. A couple of hours in the evening, then? Same salary. Interest remained lost.

He advertised in the want columns and got replies of a sort. He had given his studio as address and was scandalized by the general behavior of the few applicants. They must have totally misunderstood his ad. He was getting ready to despair when he ran into luck. He found an agency in an obscure street which needed dusting. The need applied equally to the agency and the street. He

told his story to the hard-visaged woman in charge and she was about to send him haughtily on his way, when she paused, changed her mind, pressed a button and asked him to wait a minute.

"Ask Miss Delavan to step this way," she instructed the grubby office girl who answered the summons of the button. "Miss Delavan has not had a great deal of experience," she informed the caller, "but for your sort of work she may do."

Here Miss Delavan appeared and Peter fairly gasped. If Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, or a princess out of the Arabian Nights had made her demure appearance seeking a half-time job at twelve dollars a week, he would have given the same gasp and for exactly the same reason. Miss Delavan was a beauty plus. That was her general effect on Peter, who did not stop to analyze. All he saw was a Vision, a Dream, the most glorious thing in human form his eyes had ever beheld.

The hard-faced manager was telling this paragon what the gentleman required and when she had finished the gentleman added a few remarks to the category with an earnestness he rarely employed. When the pitiful salary was mentioned he fully expected to see a regal and scornful exit, but, strangely enough, the goddess did not turn a single beautiful black hair. Instead, she favored him with a wistful glance and said in a voice dripping with music:

"Where is your office?"

"I work in my studio," explained Peter. "I have a typewriter and everything."

"Your studio?" She seemed a trifle puzzled.

"Yes. I have a studio apartment in Greenwich Village. I live there."

"Oh," said the candidate, dismayed. "I couldn't take

a position of that sort." There was a trace of bitterness in the lovely voice.

"It is quite all right, strictly business, you know," pleaded Peter. "I can give you all sorts of references as to my respectability."

"I'm afraid I couldn't—" began Miss Delavan, flushing, but at this point the hard-visaged lady interrupted:

"Really, Miss Delavan, I don't see what reasonable objection you can make. The gentleman seems perfectly sincere and straight-forward. I am afraid you don't realize the difficulties we encounter in getting you placed at all. If you don't care to consider this offer, you had better remove your name from our lists. It doesn't seem much use."

"There are two rooms," volunteered Peter, "on the ground floor, and the windows of the room where you will work look on the street. It may seem to you to be a bit unconventional, but I assure you it is quite all right. Oh, absolutely."

Miss Delavan turned her gaze full upon him, earnestly and searchingly. Her eyes were a sort of violet, he decided. Peter was accustomed to meet a square look squarely. So while she stared at him, he stared at her. There was something in her expression that mystified and disturbed him, as if her eyes were trying to tell him something important in a foreign language, which he could not understand.

Miss Delavan dropped her gaze and Peter breathed relief.

"Could I come in the afternoon, from 1 to 5?" she asked, addressing her question to the manager. The manager passed it on with her eyebrows to Peter and Peter declared that 1 to 5 suited him perfectly. It was arranged that she should come the following afternoon.

Peter rather wanted to shake hands on it, but refrained. She seemed so frightfully up-stage. The poor dear no doubt had had trying experiences with employers, being so deliriously beautiful. He must be careful not to alarm her. A bright idea occurred to him. He would have Birmy in the first day as chaperon. Not the first time he had employed him in that capacity. Good old Birmy. They could all three talk over the idea he had for a one-acter.

What a tearing beauty she was! thought Peter, threading his way out of a labyrinth of shabby streets. Name was Delavan . . . Romantic name. Black hair and violet eyes and the most absolutely perfect profile. . . . Reminded him, somehow of——

People turned to take a second look at him as he trudged along, the light of a dreamer in his eyes.

"Dope," said a passer-by to his companion.

"Dope nothin," retorted the other. "Love's young dream. She's said 'yes' and the poor nut is in Heaven. Too bad he's got to wake up some day. I think we're goin' to have an early Spring."

Yet Peter was thinking, not of Miss Delavan, but of the unattainable Marguerite.

The stage was carefully set for Miss Delavan. Typewriter, out of storage, placed properly near the window. Birmingham on hand, glancing with uneasy curiosity at the restless Peter, who was consulting his watch every few minutes and could not appear to sit still.

"One o'clock!" cried Peter, distress in his tone. The electric bell burst into song, making him jump.

"Punctual," said Peter. "Good sign." He rushed into the hall, leaving Birmy to stare after him like a bewil-

dered fish. There were voices, the sound of a door closing and Peter reappeared, ushering in Miss Delavan.

"Gosh!" thought Birmingham, "no wonder!" The inexplicable was explained; Peter's restlessness, his jumping about from chair to chair and his pacing. It was as plain as the nose on Levanski's face.

"Excuse my left hand," murmured Birmingham. Miss Delavan looked at his empty sleeve with an expression of gentle sympathy which made Peter almost envious of Birmingham's misfortune. It was worth an arm, a look like that. Miss Delavan permitted the removal of her coat, but decided she would retain her hat. She moved toward the typewriter, glanced out of the window and took a business-like seat.

Peter explained that Mr. Birmingham was on hand for a preliminary discussion of the play about to be created. He begged Miss Delavan to offer any ideas that might occur to her. Marguerite always had and was most helpful.

"So," thought Miss Delavan, "there was a Marguerite."

Peter's idea was in the nature of a joke on the audience. His theme was the exploit of the fabled Lady Godiva in Coventry town.

"Years ago at that round table at the Dutchman's" said Peter to Birmingham, "you suggested something about Lady Godiva's ride."

"Not me," said Birmingham, firmly.

"No? Then it must have been Marguerite. (Again Marguerite, thought Miss Delavan.) Yes—I remember, now. Full of corking ideas, that girl. Had another one about an Englishman and a Fiji maid which I may tackle some day. But the Godiva thing. All the characters are talking about it, you know, the riding naked through

Coventry. (Miss Delavan began to feel a sense of alarm.) We work it up to the very point of the ride itself. We have her Ladyship making her exit to prepare for the ordeal. People all excited; they've promised not to look. Sound of horse's hoofs—cocoanut shells—Here she comes! A woman screams, they all bolt for shelter. Stage clear. Horse's hoofs closer and closer. Horse's head appears from second entrance—and down comes the curtain!"

"And the audience," mused Birmingham, "pick up the chairs and throw 'em at the stage."

"Not a bit of it!" chirped Peter. "Wait—wait! Out comes stage manager, looking embarrassed and troubled. Apologizes for unfortunate accident at critical moment. Curtain rope broke—most unfortunate—performance will be resumed in a moment. Craves indulgence of audience etcetera. Stage manager off. Curtain up. Crowd on stage cheering like mad and Lady Godiva, her hair down, but muffled in a bathrobe, or whatever they used for a bathrobe in those days, is acknowledging the plaudits. Picture. Curtain. Eh, what?"

He looked toward Miss Delavan, but gathered nothing from her expression. He looked at Birmy and it was obvious that Birmy did not care for the idea. Birmingham politely asked Miss Delavan for her opinion and she blushed prettily and feared it was all beyond her. Peter argued for his plan and Birmingham argued against it and Miss Delavan was, for the moment, forgotten. She put in her time appraising her new employer and decided that he would do, even if he did write queer stories about scandalous medieval doings. The poor man with one arm gone was a Dear. He had a kind look about the eyes when he spoke to Mr. Millard that would make anybody like him.

Slowly Birmingham retreated from his antagonistic position. He admitted that very likely he was wrong. Of course he was, Peter insisted and began to make up and recite fragments of dialogue to prove his point. Birmingham commanded him to get them down on paper before they escaped, so Miss Delavan found occupation, after all. She was jumpy and nervous at first, but soon caught the idea that the proper noun was the person speaking and that which followed was what the person said.

At a pause in the proceedings Birmingham turned on her abruptly and said:

"Ever feel the divine urge to act out on the stage?"

"My goodness, no!" cried Miss Delavan, wondering if that was to be a part of her queer new duties.

"If you stick around for awhile maybe you'll get the bug," said Birmy, smiling and noted with dismay that she shuddered at his remark. "Maybe you won't" he added, soothingly, since the idea seemed to alarm her, "but you'll be the first pretty human being of the feminine gender I ever ran across who didn't want to be a star and knock 'em dead."

This was a new language and disturbing. Miss Delavan earnestly assured the one-armed gentleman that she would never want to knock anyone dead and Birmy roared. Peter, however, did not even smile and for this she was grateful.

There was more of this queer dictation and at length five o'clock arrived. The ordeal of the first day was over. Miss Delavan, however, appeared to be in no hurry and seemed uneasy when Peter smiled his dismissal. Then she haltingly begged permission to transcribe before leaving the shorthand notes she had taken down. She explained that she wrote a beautiful short-

hand at great speed, but that she was unable to read it after any considerable lapse. Peter said by all means, if it would help and Miss Delavan squared away in exact conformity with the pictures in the instruction books and tapped the keys of the typewriter with great firmness for fifteen minutes, pausing only to puzzle out hieroglyphics in her book which defied her. He gently put her straight from memory, when this occurred. He watched her operations, fascinated, and Birmingham watched them both with a mystifying grin.

The thing was done and she arose to prepare for departure.

"My turn to treat to dinner" announced Birmingham, "and if you'll come along, Miss—now—Delavan—and help Peter cut up my meat and pie for me. I'll be tickled silly."

It was a cordial invitation, genially extended, but Miss Delavan looked unaccountably terrified. She couldn't possibly. She had to go at once. Her agitation mystified them and Peter was worried. He gallantly held her coat for her, but first she must arrange her veil. It was a long, thick automobile veil and she had come swathed in its folds, but had removed it in the hall, before entering the studio. Now she wound her head up in it and became quite unrecognizable. She permitted Peter to help her on with her coat.

"One o'clock tomorrow," she gasped and bolted. Birmingham and Peter stared at each other.

"The Mystery of the Veiled Goddess," said Birmingham. "Good title for a melodrama. What's wrong with our lil' beauty? Gosh, if I had a face like that I wouldn't want to hide it!"

Peter could offer no explanation. He took up the typed pages she had completed and glanced at them.

They seemed right and regular enough, but a trifle eccentric in the spelling of the longer words.

"I don't think she has had much business experience," said Peter. "But we will manage."

"Some gazelle," said Birmingham. "You sure do know how to pick 'em. Wish I had her in my department and I wouldn't care if she could act or not. Let her go on and just look beautiful. But did you notice how she shied when I asked her if she had the bug? Sweet little greenhorn. If I was twenty years younger and unmarried——"

"But you are not twenty years younger," interrupted Peter, hurriedly, "and I infer from what you say that you are married."

"Didn't I ever tell you about that?" asked Birmingham.

"There isn't much to tell," said Birmingham, after dinner. "It was back in the dim, dark ages, about the time I threw that show together around the lithographs. She was second woman and I never noticed her much until one day at rehearsal a flat fell down edgewise and hit me a crack on the head that laid me out stiff. When I came to there was Madge on her knees doin' the good Samaritan act and bathing my fevered brow. When it came to the ministering angel thing she was certainly a bear.

"That was the queer thing about Madge. She sure did love a sufferer. Her for the under-dog, every time. Well, when I sold that script for five-hundred plunks, cash money, there wasn't any millionaire had anything on me. We got married. By a priest. She wasn't a Catholic; wasn't anything in particular, so she didn't care. We got along fine as soon as I tumbled to her

weakness. All I had to do was not to feel very well and she was a regular lil' angel from Heaven. But when I was full of pep and ready to meet all comers, she kind of lost interest; she was like that.

"I was drinkin' my share of the world's supply in those days, so most of the time I was sick enough to suit her. But one day a sleazy lil' juvenile boy in our show got to monkeyin' around my woman and I handed him the beatin' of his young life. Darn near sent him to the hospital. Madge turned right around in her traces. I was the big abysmal brute and this cootie was the pale and interestin' martyr. I might just as well have picked him up and laid him in her arms. They jumped the troupe together and later on Madge got a divorce and married him. But me, I'm still a married man according to my religion, even though my wife's got another husband."

Birmingham paused and looked thoughtful. There appeared to be nothing that Peter could say.

"Some day," resumed Birmingham, "that shrimp may pick on an insect that's weaker than he is and if he does and Madge sees it, she'll pass him up in favor of his victim. Just a born nurse, with a strong weakness for sufferers. Wonder if she was in the war? I lost track of her. Now you know, Son, why I'm off the ladies. But, as I was sayin' a little while back, if it wasn't for that, I might be just fool enough to sit up and take notice of that lil' lady you introduced me to this afternoon."

CHAPTER XXII

MYSTERY OF THE VEILED BEAUTY EXTENDS TO HER DISTURBING CONVERSATION CONCERNING A PRINCE RIDING A BUTTERFLY OVER A FIELD OF DAISIES.

INVARIABLY Miss Delavan arrived as thickly veiled as a daughter of Mahomet and as invariably she swathed her face before departing after her afternoon's duties. It troubled Peter. He ventured, once, to suggest that her strange custom was robbing her of fresh air and was likely to excite remark. She serenely accepted his well-meaning impertinence and replied:

"Oh, they probably think I have a birthmark. Anyway it isn't anybody's affair and I've always been like that. It runs in the family."

He asked a casual question about her family and she froze. That disturbing look in her eyes, as if they were conveying important information in a foreign language, reappeared. It was an expression that almost frightened Peter.

The beautiful shorthand at great speed did not improve in legibility, but Peter ultimately eliminated that source of trouble by dictating directly to the typewriter. Her fingers flew and she could keep up with his flow of thought if only he did not think too fast. The disconcerting ta-tap of the machine soon ceased from distracting him and he got along almost fairly well.

Another disconcerting feature which he could not overcome was the perfection of her profile. He found

himself gazing at it, mouth open and speech suspended, regularly hypnotized, no less, until she glanced up to see what the interruption was about. Then both of them would flush and smile and Peter would come to with a snap.

Miss Delavan was business-like and efficient in everything except spelling, punctuation and stenography. She was pleasant and friendly, too, as long as her contact with her employer was purely professional, but let him venture to evince the slightest interest in Miss Delavan the individual as against Miss Delavan the secretary, and she would instantly congeal. That look would flash into her eyes and he dreaded that look. He could not even obtain her address. She gave him a telephone number where she might be reached in an emergency, but murmured that the street and house number did not matter.

"Lady Godiva" was ultimately finished. It did not come easily for reasons of mental distraction already noted. The completed manuscript, as submitted by Miss Delavan, offended Peter's orderly and meticulous instincts, but he did not admit even to himself that as a secretary she was a failure. Certainly he seemed to work less smoothly and serenely than had formerly been his habit, when Marguerite's efficient co-operation had kept him on his course like a jolly old yacht in a fair breeze, but one could not have everything. Especially one could not have Marguerite.

The scratchy script was turned over to Birmingham for casting and rehearsal. To keep his amanuensis employed Peter started developing that idea of the South Sea Island maid and the monocled Englishman, contributed by Marguerite in the departed long ago. He told Miss Delavan about Marguerite and at first she seemed to be mildly interested, but at length the subject appar-

ently began to pall and one day she startled Peter by exclaiming:

"For the love of goodness, can't you talk about anybody else? I hate her!"

Then, before the startled young man could think up a formal apology, she burst into tears and became unaccountably agitated.

"Oh, forgive me," she wailed. "I'm a horrid, mean, spiteful girl and I didn't mean it! But I'm in such trouble and my nerves are all on edge and I feel as if I were going crazy."

Peter was immediately sympathetic. It had been his experience that when any lady associated with the theater was in tears and on edge, smoothing and patting were indicated as the correct remedy. So he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. She shrank from his touch, murmured "please—don't!" and acted like some wild creature cornered and doomed.

"I beg your pardon," said Peter, straightening stiffly. "I only meant to be kind. Perhaps if you would tell me of your troubles—"

"Troubles?" she repeated, gazing up at him, puzzled. "I haven't any troubles. What put that into your head?"

He was about to reply that she, herself, had just now mentioned having troubles, but what was the use? He gave it up as a bad job. There was no understanding women, more especially when they were beautiful and had the pip.

Birmingham got order out of chaos back stage with his characteristic energy. Peter spent his evenings in the little playhouse watching the progress of operations, for, as before, nearly all of the players were employed during the day and rehearsals were necessarily confined to evenings. There were several new faces, but the aver-

age of ability about matched the old company, except that no Helen appeared to give distinction to the organization. The old crowd had been tolerably free from restraint, but this new bunch went them several better in unblushing candor. It was the demoralizing result of the war, Peter reflected.

The legend of how Helen Raville had been stirred and boosted into fame and stardom through intimate association with this imperturbable Englishman was revived and several of the more susceptible and less scrupulous ladies of the company laid siege to the citadel of his affections. But Peter was a hard boiled egg, as the slang of the day had it. They leered and smiled and hinted in vain. He was "off the ladies" for life. All along he had known that it must be Marguerite or nothing. Fate and Dan De Freece had decided that it was to be nothing.

The bill shaped up fairly well. There was a grewsome little tragedy of undoubted strength, which needed only the touch of a Helen to become a wow. There was a poetic trifle in blank verse, picturesque in its atmosphere and pointed in its wit. A third piece promised to be actor-proof and Peter's Godiva hoax was depended upon to complete a satisfactory opening program.

It was essential that Miss Delavan should attend on her employer at the dress rehearsal for the purpose of jotting down last-minute notes. Peter broke the news casually and mentioned that she would be paid for her extra time. Miss Delavan looked frightened and declined to obey the summons. He insisted gently, but with Anglo-Saxon firmness and once more she had recourse to tears.

This time Peter kept his hands in his pockets and her tears ceased as suddenly as they had started. Composing her features into the expression of a martyr about to

undergo execution for a crime not her own, she agreed to make her appearance at the Community Playhouse at 8 o'clock of the evening in question. But he must promise, hope-to-die and cross-his-heart, not to introduce her to any person or persons whatsoever. It was evident that Miss Delavan was unsocial in her manner of life.

"I am sorry I made you cry," said Peter, contritely, as she prepared to wrap her veil about her head.

"But you didn't!" she exclaimed, generously. "You are the kindest and most considerate gentleman in the whole world and you would never make anybody cry. You are like a prince out of fairyland, riding on a beautiful butterfly over a field of millions and millions of daisies and there are millions and millions of butterflies fluttering their beautiful wings——"

She said it in a sing-song, dreamy tone and her voice faded to a whisper which tapered off to silence.

"What the deuce!" thought Peter and as she noted his startled face she flushed and smiled.

"That's only my nonsense," she explained.

"Symbolism, or something, what?" he asked, puzzled.

"Maybe," she agreed. "Anyway, you didn't make me cry. You are the kindest and most considerate gentleman and you——"

She was apparently about to give an encore and Peter coughed. This interrupted her and she abruptly completed the winding process, gave him a muffled "good bye" and was gone.

Peter stared after her. He tackled the symbolism, but could make nothing of it. She was a queer one . . . Not a bit like Marguerite. . . .

"Marguerite! Marguerite!" murmured Peter, half aloud and there was a lump in his throat. There were tears in his eyes.

CHAPTER XXIII

PETER ATTENDS A DRESS REHEARSAL WHICH CAUSES MISS DELAVAN GREAT DISTRESS AND HEARS DISTURBING RUMORS ABOUT DAN DE FREECE AND HIS WIFE.

DRESS rehearsals were no novelty to Peter and the present occasion did no more than remind him of the good old days before the war. Same old routine; same old motley gathering of Village friends and stockholders trickling into the tiny auditorium to satisfy their curiosity. Same sounds behind the same buckram curtains, now altered so as to slide up and down for the purposes of the Godiva play.

Birmingham was in high spirits.

"Back in harness, Son!" he exulted, scratching his stump. "Gee whiz, but it feels fine! Nothing like the lil' old show business, eh, what? Back stage is the only place in the world, after all! Got home and mother beaten a city block."

Birmy was right. It was a life complete in itself. Nothing else counted.

"By the way," grinned Birmy, "I saw old Dan De Freece on Broadway, today. Bumped square into him. He didn't seem to remember whether I'd ever had two arms, or not. From the looks of him I got a hunch that all is not as balmy as it might be between him and Marguerite."

"Eh—what?" exclaimed Peter.

"Nothin' definite to go on. Only he looked kind of soured on the world and when I asked him, friendly like, how was the wife, he gave me a mean look which might have meant a lot and might have meant not a thing in the world. He mumbled that she was all right and seemed to be anxious to make a get-away before I dug any deeper into his private life. I guess he don't appreciate Marguerite's capacity for high spirits——"

"He is incapable of appreciating any single one of Marguerite's virtues!" interrupted Peter, feeling ugly and unhappy. Birmingham favored him with a searching glance.

"Oh, well," he murmured, apologetically, "it's none of our business, anyway."

At this point Miss Delavan made an interesting entrance, heavily veiled and palpably nervous. She flew to Peter and Birmingham as to a refuge from a hostile mob. Her remarkable appearance and her actions focused general attention on her and there were murmurs of conjecture.

"Take off your veil, Dear," said Peter. Much association with professional girls who expected it had given him that "dear" habit. It came in so handy when you did not remember a young woman's name.

"No——no, Please!" pleaded Miss Delavan, but Birmingham supported Peter in his attitude.

"You'll smother in this stuffy show shop, girlie," said Birmingham, kindly, "and think of all the crazy guesswork you'll create. They're rubbering now to beat the cars."

Miss Delavan hastily unwound her head and straightened her hat. Her striking beauty created a mild sensation. Who was she? everybody asked everybody else. She clung closely to her two protectors, withdrawing into

a shell of reserve on the approach of any outsiders. A good many of them approached. Some of them had business and others were drawn by curiosity. Peter fulfilled his sacred agreement not to introduce a soul. Several people spoke to her without the formality of introduction, but she would not be drawn into conversation. Her aloofness served to emphasize her as a creature of mystery.

"Who's that Peter's got on his staff?" asked one girl of another. "Queen of Sheba scorning the rabble?"

"That's all a bluff" replied the more discerning one. "Looks to me like a lady crook who's afraid she'll be identified."

"Cheer up, Girlie," advised Birmingham, grinning his most encouraging grin, "It may be a rough bunch, but they ain't going to bite you. Excuse me while I go back stage and find out what in H——thunder the delay's about."

"There may be very little to do," Peter explained, "but it will be a new experience for you. I suppose you've never seen a dress rehearsal?"

Her reply astonished him.

"This is the first time I have ever been in a theater," she said. A lot of help she was going to be to him in the matter of improving suggestions.

"No!" he exclaimed, incredulously.

"My people always thought it best I shouldn't go. They thought it was too exciting." She felt that some explanation was necessary and forced herself to admit this much.

Nine-thirty and ready at last. The houselights were lowered and the curtain rose on the poetic trifle. They were seated in the third row, Peter and Birmingham on either side of her. Both felt the spasmodic start she

gave as her marveling eyes encountered for the first time the wonders of a stage scene. The piece had to do with a lady with a rose, a troubador, a warrior and a roving peddler.

Miss Delavan sat entranced and when the curtain ended the festivities, she moved and sighed as awaking from a dream.

"How did it strike you?" asked Birmingham, kindly.

"It was wonderful! Is your play going to be like that?" she asked turning to Peter.

"We shall see, pretty soon," he replied, as to a child. 'Lady Godiva' is next."

She recognized the words she had so dilligently typed and retyped, but the illusion was not destroyed. Here were really and truly living people, not just characters in a book, as she had visualized them while typing the script. The cruel husband with Satanic whiskers, the angelic lady with magnificent blonde hair (she did not guess it was a wig) the taxed-to-starvation populace, they were flesh-and-blood and very real to her. When the woman shrieked, in accordance with stage directions, Miss Delavan could not help giving a little scream in sympathy, at which a giggle was heard in the row back of them. She breathlessly followed the action to the end, where Lady Godiva, amply covered, bowed to the cheering mob, like Ty Cobb after a home run, as Birmingham phrased it.

There was a long wait, due to missing props, before the stage was ready for the next piece. Meanwhile the *dramatis personnae* of the first two plays had filed into the auditorium. Some of them called to Peter, who joined them, and Miss Delavan noted with rising indignation that they were putting familiar hands on him and even hugging him, outrageously, while he permitted the

outrage with no show of protest. But she also observed with thrilling satisfaction that he did not, in return, hug them, or paw them. He was manifestly sinned against, but not sinning.

Birmingham had abruptly left her to tear and rage back stage over the stupidity which had mislaid essential props and she was momentarily left alone and unprotected. Thus helpless she was approached by the lady who had lately held the rose and was still in her gorgeous costume of gold cloth.

"Hello, Sister," said this radiant creature, pleasantly. "How long you been with Peter Millard?" Miss Delavan murmured that it was over a month, now.

"Isn't he the twenty-four-carat darling?" exclaimed the rose lady with enthusiasm, and added: "You're a lucky kid. I can see with half an eye that he's fallen for you, good and deep. No wonder he's such a prig with us other ingenues! Well, you won a prize, all right!"

Miss Delavan did not know what to reply. The stranger's candid estimate of the situation was both rude and ridiculous. She did not know what to reply, so she made no reply at all, but turned a self-defensive back.

"You needn't be such a crab," remarked the snubbed one, haughtily. "I'm not going to steal your sweetie from you. Swell chance!" She moved gracefully away, leaving Miss Delavan dumb and dazed. What if it were true? Suppose he were—in love—with her? It couldn't be possible! Yet she fancied sometimes that Mr. Birmy (as she had come to call him) acted as if he, too, thought something of the sort. He had a way of looking at them, like Santa Claus bestowing Christmas gifts. Miss Delavan was exceedingly disturbed in her mind.

Peter and Birmingham returned and resumed their flank protection. They were ready for the third piece. This time when the curtain rose she found herself spying on a humble home, through a window of which one could see a palm tree. A young girl was with her mother. From the talk it appeared that the mother was urging the girl to accept a suitor who had repeatedly declared his devotion and who was to make a final demand for an answer. The girl, it seemed, loved this suitor, but regarded herself, for some unexplained reason, as being unworthy of him. Her mother besought her not to throw away happiness.

A fine figure of a young man entered. The mother, mumbling excuses, made her exit. Then the young man came to the point. The girl begged him to go away. Passionately she cried out that she would not marry him. He challenged her to tell him that she did not love him, but this challenge she would not meet. He became exultant and insistent.

The girl hysterically cried that she was tainted, that she was a leper. Her cry of "Tainted!" was echoed by the girl sitting tense and trembling between Birmingham and Peter. She had cried out similarly a moment before and they smiled at the effect of the melodrama upon her.

The young man in the play was heroic. It made no difference to him, he said. She loved him and, by Heaven, she was his! He approached to take her in his arms but she waved him back.

"You have told me what I have yearned to hear!" she exclaimed. "Your love is great enough to destroy you. My love is great enough to save you!" The girl grasped a convenient knife and killed herself. The horrified young man threw himself on the body. The curtain descended. Peter and Birmingham glanced in

concert at their protégé to learn how she had received this bit of drama.

Miss Delavan had fainted.

The cast of the grewsome little play proudly accepted as a sincere tribute and compliment the girl's swoon. The ex-school-teacher who had written it hurried over and administered first aid in her most pedantic manner. The startled audience, once Miss Delavan had been restored to consciousness, was inclined to regard it as a good joke. Birmingham was gently playful about it, but Peter's alarm reacted in no such manner. The victim, herself, was much ashamed of her weakness, but was inclined to shiver and weep, even after it had been pointed out to her that it was all make-believe and that actually the self-sacrificing heroine was a married woman with a small son of her own.

"Yes," murmured Miss Delavan, still whimpering, "but it *might* be true!"

She was manifestly so distressed that Peter suggested that she go home. She eagerly agreed, but when he volunteered to see her safely to her door, in a taxi, she vehemently protested that she would ride in no taxi, that she was all right again and would take the subway. He then expressed his determination to escort her to the subway and to this she did not demur.

"But why won't you let me take you home properly, in a taxi?" he demanded, hurt, as they proceeded toward Seventh Avenue, the girl for once unveiled in the public streets. The veil had been vetoed; she needed air.

"Because," she replied, "I don't like to ride in taxis—Oh!" . . .

She gave a start and clung to his arm.

"There's a policeman!" she whispered, in a frightened tone.

"Yes," replied Peter, reassuringly. "They have policemen, even in the Village." But the incident caused him to do some wondering.

"Don't come to-morrow if you're not feeling fit," he told her at the subway entrance. "I can phone and learn how you are."

"I'll be all right," she declared. "Don't bother to telephone. I'd rather you didn't."

"Very well," agreed Peter, stiffly. He held out his hand. She pretended not to see it, murmured "good night" and ran down the steps, leaving him with hand extended.

He returned to the playhouse in a brown study. What the deuce was the matter with her? A terrifying thought struck him. She had behaved like that character in the morbid little play—she seemed determined not to come into physical contact with his flesh. What could it mean? What the Devil *was* the matter? Peter gave a mental shudder.

In the subway train, Miss Delavan, her veil restored, was thinking: "If I'd taken his hand I couldn't have held back! It's torture to be with him and yet hold myself off! That girl with the rose lied. . . . I won't let myself believe that he is . . . in love with me. The leper girl did right! It was the only thing to do. . . . I think I'll run away and hide myself from him . . . run away. . . ."

But at 1 o'clock the following afternoon she appeared as usual, a little pale and wan, but very collected. She found Mr. Millard to be in a sombre mood. He proceeded to address an audience of one in his most impersonal manner.

"Before we start," he observed, "there is something I feel I ought to make clear. I could not help noticing

last evening that you did not seem to care about shaking hands with me."

She began to tremble.

"That being the case," he went on blandly, "I beg to assure you that I will not again offend."

She did not reply; she avoided tears only by the most heroic effort. Her silence was conclusive and convincing. Peter gave an elaborate imitation of dismissing something from his mind and they plunged into the humorous adventures of the South Sea ingenue and the unbending Briton. The humor, somehow, lagged and the dialogue refused to sparkle. He persisted doggedly for three pages and asked to have a look at what she had taken down.

"No use. I'm not in the mood," he decided, tearing up the pages. "I suppose I'm in a funk about to-night's opening. A bit of a stew; it means so much to all of us. If the bills gets over I shall want you on full time. I have a long play in my system. Full time and full pay. I may be able to afford thirty a week. Could you manage to give me full time?"

Miss Delavan replied demurely that she could manage. To herself she was saying: "And you are the girl who was going to run away! You poor, weak, miserable little coward!"

"By the way," said Peter, casually, "If you care to come to the opening I can have seats left for you. I don't want to intrude, but——"

"Oh, I couldn't, possibly," she murmured. It was becoming a stock phrase. Whenever he suggested anything removed from business routine she "couldn't possibly." What was the mystery? Of what was the little thing afraid? Finding it impossible to concentrate on the work at hand he dismissed her for the day. He

did not offer to hold her coat; he did not go within six feet of her. He was aloof.

She struggled into her jacket, unaided and with a heavy heart. Of course that rose girl was wrong. What an idiot to imagine for even one moment that he was in love with a being like her. It appeared that she earnestly desired that Peter should not be in love with her, but, having convinced herself that he was not, the conviction did not gratify her as much as one might reasonably expect.

About the time that Peter was anxiously watching the effect of his audience-hoaxing trifle, that evening, Miss Delavan was addressing her Heavenly Father in supplication.

"Oh, God," she was pleading, "keep him safe from loving me. Don't let him, dear God, please don't let him—but let me love him! Let me keep on loving him with all my heart and never letting him know, for Jesus' sake, Amen."

The bill got over fairly well, but the opening was disappointing, for the customers did not come in sufficient numbers to fill the house. The papers had been generous enough with advance space, but there it was: Not much more than half-a-house and nothing the matter with the weather to keep them away. And not a critic on hand. Birmingham remembered, with a pang, that there happened to be two openings uptown that evening, which would account for the absence of the wise ones. They should have picked another night for the launching of their modest craft.

Yes, the bill got over fairly well. The leper show was the smash of the performance. Joan Bradley made 'em sit up all right. Too bad she was tied down to a

husband, a kid and a gas stove. She should have been caught earlier; she had no business raising a mere family with a darned paperhanger. She had gone and spoiled a promising actress to be a commonplace mother. Oh, well, such was life in a free country. Birmingham sighed and scratched the stump of his right arm.

Peter's contribution was a disappointment, just as Birmy had feared it would be. The audience, having been skilfully spurred on to expecting something spicy, was inclined to resent the joke. Peter began to plan for a quick completion of the South Sea thing to replace the unappreciated sketch. There had been laughter, but in it was a note of peevishness and one disgruntled satyr had hissed. As for the actor-proof little play, it needed to be actor-proof. Its cast was made up of heavy stock-holders who had insisted on their pound of flesh and had been dumped into the piece as a matter of diplomacy.

"All the hams ain't on the professional stage," sighed Birmingham, "and that's Gawd's truth."

The second night brought one or two of the first-string critics and a fair-to-middling audience. By the end of the week all of the papers had commented favorably, if a bit patronizingly, on the revival of the Community Playhouse and business had somewhat responded. But only somewhat. Birmingham shrewdly analyzed the situation:

"We were fresh in 1913 and 14," said Birmingham, "but we're stale in 1919. Lil' old New York has moved ahead and here we are, trying to score a second knock-out with the same old punch. And Peter, old son, we haven't given 'em as much as a bare ankle to get het up over. It was the B. C. piece that shocked 'em into coming in crowds and we followed it up with the cute

lil' Siren in her invisible bathing suit. Honest, if there hadn't been trimming on the edges, nobody would have known Sadie had it on. I got an idea for a neat costume made of three fig leaves stuck on with adhesive tape, but, Hell, Son; we don't want to be plain smutty. Leave that for Broadway. The police, bless 'em, are busy enough running in ex-war heroes who forgot to turn in their gats and are usin' 'em in a new business. No need of makin' 'em back up the wagon to this temple of art."

"Righto," agreed Peter. "But, what to do, Old Top? What to do?"

"Give me your South Sea idyl," suggested Birmingham. We'll paint Sadie caffy-o-lay all over, dress her up in some grass and start a Fiji fad. If that don't pull 'em we might as well own up we got a bust."

"The Fop and the Fiji," thanks to its shrewd wit and Sadie's physical charms, created a pleasant stir in the box-office which kept up for several weeks. By that time, however, the South Sea fad had reached the cabarets where the customers got so much more for their time and money that the little playhouse felt the pressure of competition.

Meanwhile the mirage of returned prosperity deluded Peter into engaging his secretary on full time and starting serious work on that long play which was in his system. He had gone to his agent to learn what had happened to "The Fifth Wheel," which Kalmann had, somehow, never "reached," and learned that every producer on Broadway had turned it down as old fashioned. Well, the new piece would be strictly up to the minute, by George!

Peter continued to maintain his air of frigid reserve, which seemed actually to please Miss Delavan, but,

curiously enough, his aloofness had the result of softening her attitude toward him. While he was being amiable and friendly, she remained a haughty princess, but now that he was emulating the glacial period, she took on the manner of a devoted servitor. She even called him "Mr. Peter" and seemed inclined to immolate herself.

In other ways, also, she grew to be less restrained. She gave way to verbal symbolic dreams of butterflies and fields of daisies and no longer apologized for her childish nonsense. And one day she made her appearance with a cigar ribbon pinned to her waist. Peter guessed that she wanted to remind herself of something. Bits of bright string, employed as substitutes for finger rings and bracelets, followed the ribbon's appearance. There must be a lot of things she feared she might forget, he reflected. One day he casually mentioned her eccentric adornment. The strange, disquieting look which he had come to dread glittered in her violet eyes.

"Oh," she murmured, "I just thought they were kind of pretty. She said it like an abashed child, detected in a make-believe. The next day she showed herself divested of strings and ribbon, but there was another expression in her eyes, no less disquieting. It was like that look which had foolishly alarmed him, years before, when he caught it in the eyes of Marguerite.

The long play started promisingly. Peter felt a freedom from that emotional rigidity he had experienced in the composition of "The Fifth Wheel" and "The Winning Smile." He seemed to be letting go of his feelings, instead of holding them in check. His love scenes were quite——well, quite.

"I may be wrong," he thought, "but I fancy this is going to be good." He sought Sallie's opinion and she replied that it was wonderful. She had said exactly the

same thing about "Lady Godiva" and "The Fop and the Fiji." Peter imagined that if he should read to her a page of vital statistics as being his own composition she would, on request for an opinion, declare it to be wonderful. He could not depend on her verdict. She was a beautiful girl and so forth, but she had no brains. Not at all like Marguerite. . . .

Marguerite! She had married that ass, De Freece and Birmy had reported that they weren't clicking. . . . If De Freece did not treat her like the blessed goddess she was, by George, he deserved to have his head knocked off. Peter could vividly visualize himself knocking off De Freece's head and serve him jolly well right.

Peter looked over to where Sallie was industriously tapping. He looked at Sallie and saw Marguerite. Queer optical delusion.

And Sallie? There were days when she was supremely happy; those days when Mr. Peter progressed so swimmingly with his work that he had no mind for anything else. He seemed not to know she was there and she could adore him from the security of her mental invisibility. But one day he had called her "Sallie, Dear." He had immediately apologized and called it a "professional custom," whatever that might mean. Still, at the same time he had been looking at her with an expression that—Sallie had determined not to come back again, after that day, but she was pitifully weak and could not stay away. She fancied she could see it looming, this love of a good man for her. It meant tragedy, but she could not raise her hand to stay it.

Some day he must know her for what she was; it was inevitable. She, herself, must tell him. She would tell him now—this minute! But she kept silent. Just another day of basking in the glory of his smile. . . . To-morrow she would tell him. . . . Always to-morrow!

CHAPTER XXIV.

HELEN HAS A WONDERFUL PLAN WHICH NEEDS ONLY THE CO-OPERATION OF PETER, WHO FLATLY DECLINES TO CO-OPERATE.

A LETTER came to Peter, addressed to the Community Playhouse in half-formed, sprawling handwriting. "Who is the illiterate?" thought Peter and opened the letter to find out.

"Dear Peter: (he read) It may supprize you to hear from me after all these years, but I cant forget the good old Days and am takeing a chance on This reaching you at the little Show shop where we was both so Happy. I suppose you have heard of my Success as a Baildon star and wish you would drop in to see my work in the Michigoose, but what I wanted to say is This. I would like to see you about writeing a Play for me because you know so well what suits my Abilities; so after all this is a buisness letter! So I will be waiting for you to-morrow aft at 3 P. M. Thursday in the long corradore of the Hotel Aster be sure and Be there as it means buisness for us both. Hopeing this finds you well, I am, as ever, yrs truly, Helen.

"P. S. Arthur has Gone to Chicago so no more at present!"

It was like a bolt out of the blue. Peter had never before received written word from Helen. He reflected that whatever may have happened to her table manners, her elementary education had manifestly received no

particular attention in the course of training that had made her a celebrity. A curious letter; half sentimental and half practical, with a touch of the clandestine in the postscript. Writing a play for the eminent Helen Raville was an attractive proposition, especially now, when funds were diminishing and the Community Players were on the edge of disaster. He would demand a thousand dollars advance royalty, no less! Perhaps more. It was, positively, a life-saver. Early fall production in the best theater in town. . . . But why hadn't the invitation come from Arthur Baildon direct, since Baildon was decidedly the arbiter of his own enterprises?

He made a punctual appearance in the long corridor of the hotel, but found no Helen there. She arrived, ten minutes late, and her face lighted hungrily when she saw him.

"So good of you to come," she simpered in her best Baildon manner and held out a slim white hand. They found an unoccupied settee and made themselves comfortable. A shifty-eyed house detective passed them, but recognized the lady and forebore disturbing them.

"How well you are looking, after all these yeahs," murmured Helen in the choicest accents. She was an excellent mimic when she remembered to be. Presently, however, she forgot and relapsed into the Helen he had known. She insistently harked back to the past, although Peter, eager and anxious to learn about this new play idea, tried valiantly to keep her to the present. She even reminded him of what he had said to her, that time. She would never forget it. Never!

"But about this play," he kept insisting and at last it came out. Helen was dissatisfied; her popular triumph was as Dead Sea fruit. She was compelled to work hard and she was lazy. She could not call her soul her own;

more particularly in the matter of meals. Arthur Baildon was starving her to death. Her hungry look became intense as she voiced this complaint. Not only could she not eat what she liked, but she was not permitted to eat enough of what she did not like. She had a physical instructress, supplied by the management, who was a Hateful Thing. The massage was the only bearable feature of the daily grind. Helen had always shown a weakness for pawing and being pawed.

The upshot of the matter was that Helen had fully decided to throw over Arthur Baildon and his irksome authority and start out on her own.

"But your contract!" gasped Peter, scandalized.

"Oh, that will be all right," smiled Helen, reassuringly. "I got a cousin who's a lawyer and he's found a flaw in the contract that you could drive a mail truck through. He says Arthur couldn't do a thing except get a temporary injunction that would be vacated as soon as the judge saw the contract and heard the argument. Now, what I was thinking about was this:"

Helen revealed the comforting information that she had eighty-thousand dollars, unspent and available, and was eager to finance herself as an independent star. All she needed was a play and Peter was the man to supply her need; the only man who understood her and knew her true abilities.

"And Peter," said Helen, softly, "I haven't ever married; somehow I just couldn't, remembering the old days and what you told me that time, you know, about loving me."

She fell silent in maidenly confusion and Peter squirmed. Since he would not follow up the conversation, she resumed it, herself, while Peter's heart sank with the bitter realization that he had dreamed his dreams in

vain and still had to face the grim reality of a hostile fate.

Meanwhile her greedy imagination got to work and she pictured a life of many meals and Peter. He would be her dramatist and she would be his star. He would write her parts that did not call for extreme slenderness. Suppose she did gain a few pounds? Her place was secure and the public would not grudge her those few pounds, nor the self-indulgence that went into their making. She was eligible, gifted and rich. What more could he demand? She was offering, without compunction, to buy him.

Peter was low in his mind and in his finances, but he was not for sale. He had no intention of understanding her broad hints, nor of encouraging her in dishonorable desertion of the man who had made her. He argued, as diplomatically as possible, the unfairness of throwing Arthur Baildon, but he might as well have argued with a brick wall. She simply could not see it. It was legal and anything that was legal must be all right. They could not arrest her for breaking a contract, especially a contract which permitted the free passage of a mail truck.

If Mr. Baildon wanted him to write a play for Helen, he would be charmed; otherwise there was nothing doing, absolutely.

Helen began discreetly to blubber.

"I had it all planned out so nice," she complained, "and you won't listen to plain common sense. It isn't you that's breaking a contract! What do you care? You and I could just pile up the money together. Do you know what I played to last week? Holy Week? Sixteen thousand dollars. There were six empty seats Good Friday night. Why ought I to be grateful to that slave

driver? He's made a dollar for every cent he ever spent on me. I can't stand it, darling! I tell you I got to have decent meals!"

There it was! Meals and Peter were in the same category. She was offering him a fortune and easy fame; humbling herself without compunction and the Big Boob wouldn't bite. Life was a hollow sham and Helen (temporarily) wished she were dead.

Peter left her ceremoniously, but none the less flatly, more frozen than usual. Helen produced an expensive affair of perfumed leather and gold and fixed up her eyelids and nose with the aid of a tiny pad and a miniature mirror. Then she arose and wandered mournfully into the grill where she ate, sadly, but plentifully. Arthur was in Chicago and the physical instructress not on hand to deter her. Life gradually assumed a more cheerful hue. She could not manage another mouthful. As for Peter—well, she guessed there were other playwrights!

CHAPTER XXV.

ANOTHER FLOP ASSAILS PETER, BUT HE PROMISES SALLIE DELAVAN TO DO NOTHING DESPERATE, WHICH ONLY GOES TO SHOW.

IT was in a dour frame of mind that Peter foresaw the slow approach of that neglect which was soon to pronounce the doom of the Community Playhouse. Things were, indeed, blah. He was irritable and uneasy and in this unhappy condition he confessed to Miss Sallie Delavan that he could no longer maintain the full-time schedule. She replied brightly that it did not matter. She had resources of her own and could well afford to work for nothing, just for the experience it gave her. He could not permit this. She insisted that there was the Play to be considered, getting along as it was, so wonderful and everything. Peter, his ears back metaphorically, bluntly asserted that the matter did not admit of argument. It was half-time and half-pay, or he would have to dispense with her services. Miss Delavan flatly declined to be discharged. She was a free agent and nobody had any right to stop her from working for nothing if she felt like it. It was a deadlock.

The next day she found him with a smiling countenance. Everything was righto. He'd had a bit of luck and they would carry on, full time and full pay. She accepted his joyous announcement at its face value, but the truth was that Peter, in his desperation, had taken the plunge. He was drawing on his precious reserve.

Anarchy now reared its head at the Community Playhouse. The takings were steadily diminishing and with reduced pay envelopes came a reduced respect for authority. Birmingham raged in vain, but threats of fines only brought scornful laughter. His own salary languished; he was, as he expressed it, living on the smell of an oil rag. One evening Sadie Greenbaum failed to appear and a makeshift understudy was catapulted on with disastrous results. It developed that Sadie's tantalizing physical display in the Fiji piece had captured the heart of an alcoholic Columbia student who forestalled expulsion from the University by disappearing and taking Sadie with him.

A landlord with no soul for struggling art formed the habit of nightly visits to the box-office. Finally when he claimed the gross receipts there was a strike. The company refused to work for the exclusive benefit of any profiteering landlord. They were induced to finish a performance that was three-quarters over when the bad news broke, but the finish of the performance marked also the finish of the enterprise.

The day after the collapse Birmingham wandered into Peter's studio.

"Want to do a lil' favor for a starving gent?" he asked, his shame-faced grin in conspicuous evidence.

"Certainly, by all means," replied Peter. "How much?"

"Nothing like that, Son," replied Birmingham, gravely. "Only I was thinkin' maybe you could throw together a nice lil' one-acter that would do for vaudeville. Something about a one-armed man, for instance."

Peter immediately stopped work on the Play and attacked this new problem. Together they tossed off a vehicle, while Sallie's fingers established a new Sallie

speed record. When it was finished she declared the little piece to be wonderful. Peter grunted.

"Our lil' cricket is right," agreed Birmingham. "This is goin' to get me on at the Palace next to closing inside of six weeks."

"Where's your nice big diamond you used to wear on your wedding finger?" asked Sallie with child-like directness.

"I loaned it to a pal who wanted to make a flash with his girl," mumbled Birmy, flushing and avoiding Peter's look of clear reproach. The following day he appeared twisting the restored ring around his finger with his thumb. Sallie saw it.

"How did the gentleman make out with his girl?" she asked in her innocence.

"Fine!" grinned Birmingham, with a glance at Peter. "She couldn't resist him."

His confident prediction regarding next-to-closing position at the Palace was not strictly borne out, but he did achieve the Number Three spot, with a salary in keeping. Peter's royalty was twenty-five dollars a week, when the act was working and the drain on his reserve was thereby lessened. Better far than that, however, he reflected, good old Birmy was provided for.

"The only lopsided star in existence!" sang Birmy "I tell you, originality counts in this business."

The long play, at this period of its interruption, was well along and Peter, not wholly confident of Sallie's judgment, asked his old friend to look it over and give him the honest-to-goodness low-down on it.

"You're there, son!" was the verdict, delivered in a tone of awe. "You've cut out your cynical monkey tricks. Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde had you skinned at that game, anyway. This dope is one hundred per

cent human interest, Boy. It's like I told you. You've lived, loved and suffered and it needed that to bring you out. But who's the lady who completed the miracle the war began?"

This was vicious of Birmingham, but, in the goodness of his heart, he thought it was helpful. Peter feigned not to have heard, but Sallie blushed pink and an expression of poignant tragedy clouded her violet eyes.

Birmingham was on the road with his sketch and sending royalties with clock-like regularity. Still, twenty-five dollars a week is just that and nothing more. Peter's capital continued slowly to shrink. Fired by Birmingham's genuine enthusiasm for his new script, he speeded up his efforts and a spring day found four manifolded copies of "The Road to Reason" duly red-inked and bound in paper covers, ready for managerial consideration.

Then began a heart-breaking period of futile peddling. A letter to Straus, asking permission to submit the play, remained unanswered, silence being considered a polite negative in the Straus offices. Peter heard, on the street, that Straus was going in for foreign plays, especially German and Austrian scripts, which, by reason of the vastly depreciated value of marks and kronen, could be tied up for what amounted in dollars to a bagatelle.

Other producing houses were willing to consider the piece, but not one snapped it up and the copies came back to him in a suspiciously fresh condition. Summer followed spring and still nobody wanted "The Road to Reason." In a sort of panic Peter applied to the Guardian for his old place, or any other, on its staff, but there was a slump, it appeared, and men were being laid off. Peter's capital was a shadow of its former self.

The English income was being taxed to death on the other side.

Peter abandoned all efforts to conceal his drooping spirits. He haltingly hinted to Miss Delavan that she had better find other employment, since there did not appear to be anything doing in the Peter line. There were no new plays in his system; he had put everything into "The Road to Reason." Not much encouragement to try again; he was written out, empty, squeezed dry.

His depression was contagious. Sallie was fiercely indignant over the stupidity of a Broadway that could not perceive the merits of the most wonderful play ever written, but being indignant did not mend matters. She began to sniffle, which was bad. He had rather expected that she would make an effort to buck him up a bit, but at a moment when his backbone was as a dishrag, behold, so was Sallie's. She had no reserves of encouragement. Like the moon she took her illumination from the sun and as a sun Peter was just now decidedly not on the job.

"This won't do, you know," he announced, taking up his hat. "If you continue to cry and I remain here, God knows what madness I shall be impelled to commit."

He felt an inclination to coddle her, she seemed so helpless in her forlorn beauty, and coddling Sallie was not to be thought of!

"I am going out for a bit," said Peter, savagely. She looked up, tearfully.

"You're—you're not going to do anything—desperate?" she demanded, looking somewhat desperate, herself.

"Desperate?" exclaimed Peter. "Of course not!"

Thus do mortals make reckless assertions.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PETER EXPERIENCES THE SHOCK OF HIS LIFE AND FORGETS ALL ABOUT HIS PROMISE TO SALLIE.

WANDERING aimlessly Peter came to Fifth Avenue and caught a bus which, wonder of wonders, had a vacant seat on top. The bus fare was ten cents and he could have taken the elevated for five, or walked. But the squandering of a dime was in line with his reckless mood.

The bus threaded its way up the avenue and Peter, thinking disconnected thoughts, idly watched the passing sidewalk parade without actually seeing it. It was a blur of faces, a kaleidoscope of weaving humanity, a—well, it was a crowd of passers-by; nothing to focus the attention.

At Forty-second Street there was a halt to permit the passing of cross-town traffic. Then the bus lurched on again and as it reached the up-town corner, cutting off a stream of pedestrians, a face in the waiting crowd stood out vividly, like a flash of lightning on a dark night.

Marguerite.

She did not see him; she had hurried to the crossing only to be cut off by the policeman's whistle. Her face wore a look of patient annoyance. Peter literally gasped. He had definitely put Marguerite away; she had gone out of his life. She was not Marguerite any more. She was Mrs. Dan De Freece, a stranger. He had not since his return from the other side made any attempt to

locate her. Naturally when he read Variety his eyes instinctively sought for her name. Nothing improper in that. But beyond this he had not gone.

The bus was half-way between Forty-second and Forty-third streets when Peter arose with no conscious plan and pressed the signal button hard and long. He climbed down the silly little stairway and hopped off before the bus had quite come to a stop. Then he hurried back toward the Public Library.

Why? What did he think he was doing, anyway? Suppose he found her in the vast haystack of humanity? What would he have to say to her? Peter's reason had nothing to do with the course of Peter's feet. He had seen her, he knew that she was somewhere near and that whatever her name or her condition, she was Marguerite, come to life again in the adorable flesh, the girl who had looked at him in a way the mere recollection of which thrilled him, the girl who had said she would crawl on her bare knees for him, although she would not marry him!

He came upon her on the northwest corner; she was looking idly at a show window in which were displayed some paintings. He marched up to her like a regiment on parade.

"Hello," said Peter.

Marguerite glanced up and his pulse jumped when he noted that at sight of him her face paled, then lighted up with genuine pleasure. Impulsively she thrust out her hand.

"Well, of all——if it isn't Peter!" she cried. She squeezed his hand hard and looked squarely into his eyes.

"For two pins I'd kiss you, right here!" said Marguerite. "How well you look! And you ran off to the

war without ever saying good by. You didn't get killed, or anything, did you?"

"Here I am," he replied, grinning like an idiot. In his mind he was saying: "And she threw herself away on Dan De Freece! She belongs to another man!"

For two pins she would have kissed him, she had said. He glanced at her left hand, the one he was not holding, but it was gloved. He was spared the hateful sight of her wedding ring.

"Let go my hand, you Big Silly," she smiled and there was a nervous quaver in her voice. He realized that he had been pressing it cruelly and hastily desisted. She wiggled her fingers to restore the circulation and smiled up at him in quite the old way. Marriage had not changed her externally, after all.

"I say," said Peter, "have you lunched?"

"No," she lied. It was 3 o'clock in the afternoon. "Come around to my hotel," she suggested. "I'm stopping at the St. Gerald and we can have a bite in my apartment. Oh, I'll let you pay for it."

"So," thought he, "they are stopping at an hotel." He felt indignant. So precious a jewel as Marguerite should be set off in a real home, a beautiful and expensive home. What was the bounder thinking of!

She took his arm, as in the old days, and guided him. Her touch sent a thrill through him. Suddenly she fell silent and Peter had no words, either, but she squeezed his arm in the most friendly way.

"I saw 'The Winning Smile' on the screen," she observed, after a long silence. "Pretty bad, wasn't it? Especially that leading woman."

"I didn't see it," he replied. "I was over-seas, you know; but Birmy told me about it. He said it was the character man who was rotten."

"Birmy?" she exclaimed. "Was he over-seas, too?"

"I should say he was! He lost an arm."

She stopped dead short in the street.

"No! Birmy lost an arm? I can't believe it. What was he doing in the war? A man of his age?"

"Knights of Columbus."

"Oh, that's so. He's a Catholic. I forgot."

When they reached the little hotel on the side street, Peter was still relating the circumstance of Birmy's casualty and of how they had met at the rest station. Several times he was on the point of mentioning Birmingham's interesting bit of gossip about her and De Freece, but each time something seemed to choke him.

"I wonder if he will be there, at the hotel?" he thought.

Marguerite briskly sketched a lunch order to the desk clerk and led Peter to a tiny elevator. She had a parlor, bedroom and bath. He looked about swiftly and comprehensively. He detected no sign of masculine habitation. It mystified him.

"Now then!" exclaimed Marguerite and deliberately and enthusiastically kissed him. Peter felt an awful sense of guilt for them both. He fell back a pace in dismay.

"Oh, I say!" protested Peter. She gave him a searching look in which was a trace of disappointment.

"Same old Peter!" she mocked. "I thought the war would change you, but all it did was to give you a becoming tan."

"How is your husband, may I ask?" he blurted.

Marguerite flushed scarlet.

"Quit your kidding, darling," she said tersely. "It doesn't become you."

"Far be it," he protested. "Surely I may inquire after your husband, may I not?"

"Yes you may not," she retorted. "What are you driving at? There isn't any such animal."

"What!" roared Peter.

At this point the waiter with the luncheon tapped at the door. It took him a long dreary age to set the makeshift table and make his exit.

"Do you mean to tell me that you are not married?" demanded Peter, as the door closed behind the waiter.

"Who told you I was?" countered Marguerite, tormentingly.

"Birmy did, over in France."

"Birmy had better tend to his own knitting."

"But he said De Freece——"

"Oh, him!" cried Marguerite, apparently enlightened. "Well, Peter boy, you musn't believe all the back stage scandal you hear."

"He said De Freece was following you about, worshipping the very ground you trod. He said Dan told him you were to be married to him."

"Forget it!" advised Marguerite, lightly. "I suppose I was engaged to Dan in a sort of kind of way. He offered me the pick of parts in the Straus productions and I was tempted. But when it came down to brass tacks, I just couldn't see it through, and told him so."

"But," insisted the bewildered Peter, "only a few weeks ago Birmy asked Dan right out how you—how his wife was and——"

"That's all right," giggled Marguerite. "Dan married Adelaide Hastings and I hear that she won't let him call his soul his own. He's a Czar at rehearsal, but the thing the cat brought in at home."

"And you are positively not married?" he persisted feeling strangely light in his head.

"Not so you'd notice it," she replied serenely.

"Well!" gasped Peter and sat down.

"By the way," she asked suddenly, "Are YOU?"

"Me? Married? God forbid!" exclaimed Peter fervently. An idea occurred to him at this point and he consulted his watch.

"Going to dine with me?" he asked.

"Well—I say! Let's have lunch first."

"No, but I want to know."

"Oh, all right," she murmured.

"May I use your phone? I want to report that I won't be home."

Sallie's wan voice greeted him. Peter's end of the conversation was like this:

"I say, is that you, Sallie? (Marguerite sat up straight) Yes. . . . I hope you are feeling better. . . . That's right. No use crying and so forth. . . . Absolutely not! . . . Me? Oh, I'm top hole. . . . Yes, really! Just met a—a very dear old friend. ("Tell her who it is," muttered Marguerite) . . . Yes. . . . I was about to suggest that you call it a day and go home. . . . ("She doesn't live there, at any rate!" thought Marguerite) Oh, surely. It will do you good. The usual time to-morrow. Sweet dreams. . . ("That's quite unnecessary," decided Marguerite) . . . Good-by."

"Who is Sallie?" she demanded, as he turned to her, beaming.

"My secretary," he replied. She stared at him, suspiciously and he, feeling the suspicion, quailed before the accusation in her hazel-green eyes.

"It's none of my business, of course," she admitted, icily. "Let's have luncheon." Neither of them ate much.

"Speaking of Sallie," went on Marguerite, later, "have you seen Helen recently?"

Not even the war had cured him of blushing, she

noted. He sketched his meeting with Helen, leaving out the non-essentials, so that the omissions showed glaringly. Peter was still the blundering male, she reflected, utterly helpless where designing females were concerned and all women were designing, except Marguerite. His manifestly abridged description of the Helen encounter, on top of the Sallie revelation, made her momentarily bitter, but this mood had no real encouragement in the light of his open joy in being with her once more, so she gradually melted beneath the radiance of his happiness. He told her about the final flop of the Community Players and how nobody could see the merits of "The Road to Reason."

She expressed a lively interest in the new play and he outlined the plot, while she listened, critically alert. Her attitude of criticism, however, became disarmed as she watched his face and fell into the spell of his recital. When he finished she was in a glow.

"Why, it's corking!" she declared. "Hits the heart right in the bullseye every time. "I'd love to play that American girl. And you mean to tell me those gents-furnishing, shoe-string-peddling dubs on Broadway can't see it? Oh, Damn."

His expression reminded her that he did not like to hear her swear and she apologized. In the midst of the apology an idea occurred to her and she jumped up.

"Give me that script," she exclaimed, "and I'll get a production! I'll take it right over to Dan De Freece and tell him he's just GOT to put it on!"

Peter glared and flushed.

"Under no circumstances will I permit you to do any such thing," he barked. "I'd far rather chuck it into the sewer."

"Glory Hallelujah!" thought Marguerite, happily,

"The dear boy is jealous." Aloud she said: "Well, let me read it, won't you?"

He had no objection to that. She was all for immediate action.

"Where is this wonderful script?" she demanded. "At your house? Lead me to it. No time like the present. Get a taxi."

Her influence was magnetic and stimulating. Peter was a poor man and daily growing poorer, but without a moment's hesitation he got a taxi. It was like the old days; she had spurred him on then, just as she was spurring him on now. Gad—what a girl she was!

Marguerite picked up a hairpin with elaborate nonchalance and placed it on the table. This Sallie, obviously, was a brunette. A sweeping glance about the room revealed no photographs of girls. It was a shabby little place and not very tidy. There was dust. So far, so good; there was no evidence of the blighting hand of a loving woman. She removed the rubber cover from the typewriter.

"Your secretary doesn't keep your mill very spick-and-span," she said, lightly. "It hasn't been wiped or dusted for ages."

"Hasn't it?" replied Peter, digging among his scripts. "I hadn't noticed."

He read "The Road to Reason" aloud and did it very well. She found it to be even better than his description had led her to hope. There was humor in it, not mere wit, and the darn thing gripped. She suggested several improvements, especially in the last act and these Peter eagerly accepted, making marginal notes. More than ever was it like the old times. She had the sort of intelligence that helped a chap. Didn't consider everything "wonderful," like Sallie.

At seven o'clock he suggested dinner.

"Got anything in the house?" she asked. "Do let's have it here." So they threw together an impromptu meal and each thought how chummy and cozy it was, but refrained from voicing the thought.

Marguerite was more than ever glad that she had not yielded to the temptation of the pick of parts in the Straus offices. This had involved comparative hardships, since her heartless treatment of the powerful De Freece had alienated his interest and influence to an extent that he actually exerted himself to keep her off of Broadway. He had banished her to the sticks, with calculated malice, but the sticks had been pretty good to her and Marguerite had a comfortable savings account.

Peter, watching her now, thought of poor, untidy, tawdry Sallie, with her scatter-brain inefficiency, her string jewelry, out of which he had laughed her, and her grotesque symbolisms. He was fond of Sallie, of course, but——

How was it that he hadn't been crazy about Marguerite in the old days? She had been dead right when she declared that he did not know what love was. He had been an utter clod, an insensible stick, no less. But now!

She felt his new attitude; Marguerite's intuitions were dependable. Several times he maneuvered to approach her and she gracefully eluded him. It was rather unfortunate that when he finally managed to take her unawares he held a dishtowel and she a vegetable dish. It aroused her sense of the ridiculous and her laughter stabbed him.

"Now—now—Silly!" she cautioned, slipping away with his clumsy kiss tingling on her ear. "You musn't get mushy."

"I want you to marry me!" he proclaimed.

"Ancient history," she retorted. "Why go into all that again?"

"It is different, now," he pleaded. "Can't you see it is?"

"How, different?"

"Well—I want you."

"Didn't you want me before? That other time?"

"Not the way I want you this time."

"Passing fancy," she decided. "I'm not to be caught that way. You know what I told you. I've got to be worshipped and adored. Fifty-fifty, or I won't play."

"I'll make it seventy-thirty, any old terms you please. I'm mad about you, Darling. I'm—well, in short, I'm mad about you."

"Passing fancy."

"Nothing of the sort."

"How about this Sallie?"

"Well? What about her?"

"Anything between you two?"

"Ab-solutely not!"

"She's prettier than I am, and younger, isn't she? Don't answer if you don't want to. I'll bet she's in love with you."

"Ha!" exclaimed Peter, triumphantly, "You're wrong! She shudders at my merest touch!"

"Oh! You admit that you've touched her."

"What I mean is that she doesn't care even to shake hands with me. Why this quibbling? Never mind Sallie. What I demand to know is: Do you love me?"

"None of your business, sir, she said." Marguerite recalled having used this before, ages ago. Still, it was a pretty good line.

"The reason I ask," he explained, "is that I love you. There, by George, you have it! You cannot complain that I omitted the important part, this time!"

She regarded him seriously, her inscrutable eyes studying him reflectively.

"You're in love with love, Dear," she smiled, at last. "That's what is the matter with you. You have reached the interesting stage of adolescence; you are—let me see —twenty-six, isn't it? About ten years behind the average; but that's not so bad for an Englishman. You'll catch up, some day.

"I know you so well, Peter!" said Marguerite. "No— don't try to hug me. Come to me when your love is grown up, if ever. There's no hurry. We're both young. No, you can't come with me. The Sixth Avenue surface will take me to my corner. Think it over, Peter. You're awfully nice and——oh, all right: You can kiss me good night."

She was subdued all the way up Sixth Avenue. There had been electricity in that kiss; she could not dodge the fact and did not want to. Marguerite was on the way to being extremely happy.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SALLIE MAKES HER POOR LITTLE CONFESSION AND PETER REJOICES THAT HE KEPT HIS MOUTH SHUT.

PETER hopped out of bed with an unaccountable feeling of buoyant energy. Then he remembered last night's kiss. It still tingled. He would win Marguerite, by George, if he had to knock her down and carry her off! Adolescence his eye! Passing fancy likewise and ditto. He was all set: Marguerite or nothing. It had been that way for years and it was still that way. And she had chuckled jolly old De Freece! Poor old De Freece. Good chap, but he had no business aspiring to such heights as Marguerite.

He hummed while he took his cold bath and with Peter humming was an achievement. He shaved himself in two-four tempo and was considering a bit of a solo dance when the colored maid came in to do up his rooms. He was so genial to the colored maid that she became pleasantly alarmed and on her departure he tipped her a dollar. She wondered if he meant anything by it.

He was grinning fatuously and searching his trunk for a photograph of Marguerite which he had laid away out of sight when he thought she belonged to another, when Sallie entered. The search for the photograph was temporarily abandoned, but the fatuous grin persisted, even after he had noticed that Sallie was tricked out in her string jewelry.

"Got some frightfully important work for you!" he

announced. "A friend of mine has suggested some corking ideas for the last act of the play and we'll get right to work on them."

"You're very cheerful, this morning, aren't you?" murmured Sallie at the typewriter. She herself looked as if she had not rested well. It gave a sinister touch to her marked beauty.

"What's mere beauty, after all?" thought Peter, realizing that Sallie's profile was in the last analysis, nothing but a profile. He essayed to whistle while gathering his forces for the work at hand and Sallie again remarked that he seemed more cheerful than usual.

"I should say so!" beamed Peter with honest joy. "Nothing like decision, Sallie. I have made up my mind to pursue a certain definite course of action and nothing can stop me. Yesterday I was all in a fog and to-day I'm out in the open sunshine!"

Sallie felt a vague alarm. What was coming?

"I have reached a turning point in my life," he went on, earnestly. "I am no longer muddled." He seated himself for a chat, the new work forgotten. She regarded him with parted lips and he almost resented her soft beauty; it seemed unfair to Marguerite.

"I'll tell you what has happened," said Peter. "I've jolly well taken a tumble to myself. For a long time I've known what was wrong with me, but I wouldn't admit it. You see, when a chap is in love and realizes it——"

Her cry stopped him. She paled and gazed at him with terror-haunted eyes.

"Don't!" she moaned. "You must not say it! I mustn't let you. Oh, I've seen it coming—I couldn't help seeing it. I can't work here any longer. I've known all along it was coming to this and I ought to have quit before."

"But, my dear girl!" exclaimed Peter, dismayed at her misinterpretation of his words and his attitude.

"Please!" she interrupted, miserably. "You mustn't say such things to me——"

She choked, but forced out the words:

"I am tainted!"

Peter gasped. A mystery was about to be solved. What was coming?

"I'll tell you all about it," she murmured, pulling herself together. "I am a runaway—and I ought to have told you long ago."

"Unhappy at home," muttered Peter, as to himself.

"I didn't run away from home, but from—well, a sanitarium. It was the second time. I was a—a nervous case. Not a *mental* case, you know; only a nervous case."

Peter did not quite catch the drift of what she was saying.

"There were mental cases there, too," she went on. "It was a sort of asylum. But I wasn't a mental case," she said with pitiful insistence. "Only it isn't very nice, you know, being with poor, unfortunate insane people—so I ran away. The first time I went back home and they let me stay until I was naughty again. They said I was naughty, but I don't know—I didn't mean to be, exactly. then they sent me back to Philadelphia, to the sanitarium. Dr. Kirchner was very nice. He explained to me that I was only a nervous case and not like my mother. She was mental. She died in the sanitarium, you know."

Sallie interlaced her pretty fingers and hesitated.

"Dr. Kirchner told me, in case I ran away again, that I must never marry," she went on, "because then I might become a mental case. He said I had inherited a tendency, but if I always kept away from excitement and

strong emotion and all that, why, I might get over being even a nervous case."

She looked at him where he sat, in a sort of stupor of amazement.

"You don't think I'm mental, do you?" she asked, pathetically and did not wait for his reply. "I thought maybe you might, once, when you spoke about my make-believe rings and things, so I made up my mind I wouldn't put them on any more."

She glanced defensively at the bits of twine around her fingers and wrists.

"But they're rather pretty, anyway," she murmured, "and they don't do any harm."

She struggled back to the present situation:

"They wouldn't let me marry you. Dr. Kirchner told me about that; he said there was a law against it. He was very kind and explained things so nicely, but it is just as I am telling you. They wouldn't let me marry you, ever."

Peter maintained silence. What, in God's name, was there for him to say? Sallie wandered over to where her hat and veil lay. She put on the hat, but ignored the veil.

"I'm going, Mr. Peter," she said, smiling at him with a sadness that was not all sadness. "I don't need to take the old veil, because I'm going back to Dr. Kirchner and I don't care who sees me. You can have the veil to remember me by. Can I have this to remember you by?"

Her hand was on a snapshot taken of Peter in the Catskills. She took his permission for granted and slipped the photograph into her bag.

"It had to come," she said, at the door, "so I'm glad you started to tell me. I wanted to hear it—oh, you don't know how much I wanted to hear it! Like that leper

girl in the little play. I wanted to hear you tell me and I'll carry that sweetness in my heart forever and ever, because you are the finest, dearest—You are like a prince out of fairyland, riding on a beautiful butterfly over a field of millions and millions and *millions* of daisies and then it gets darker and darker, but I can hear the wings of the butterflies and—well, good-by. I am going to tell Dr. Kirchner all about you and how I was a good girl and wouldn't let you say it right out and I promise I won't become a mental case for Jesus sake, Amen."

She was gone. Peter sat, sprawled in his chair, staring straight ahead.

"God! If she hadn't interrupted me!" he was thinking. "Poor, sweet little kid! If it's any comfort to her to think, as she does. . . . Poor Child. . . . By George, I'm glad I kept my mouth shut! Even so I am very fond of Sally."

He rose with a sigh and went to the telephone directory and hunted up the number of the St. Gerald Hotel.

When Marguerite dropped in, in response to his summons, she found him somewhat subdued. He explained that his secretary had quit; been called away suddenly and wouldn't return. Gone to Philadelphia to live, he believed. She did not press him for details and his subdued mood did not escape her. Well, whatever had happened, the result was a gain for Marguerite, so she forebore from asking awkward questions. She eagerly agreed to his suggestion that she work with him in making the changes in "The Road to Reason," stipulating only that there should be no Mush.

"I don't call it mush to love you to distraction," he protested.

"Neither would I," she agreed, "but if you start being sentimental we'll never get anywhere with that play.

Business is business and canoodling is something else and that's that, as we Yankees are so fond of observing."

He contained himself with what was to Marguerite discouraging success, but they finished the revision all the more effectively. Thus it was that Birmingham found them on his return from the road one hot August day. He brought a breeze with him when he burst in unexpectedly. There was always a breeze where Birmy was.

The spectacle of Marguerite at the typewriter astonished him, but he kept his own uneasy counsel until Peter remembered that utterly false rumor.

"Say, Marguerite didn't marry De Freece, you scandalmonger!" he exclaimed. "She hasn't married anyone—yet."

"I only told you what Dan told me," retorted Birmingham. "He said she was goin' to marry him and the other day when I saw him, he was certainly married. And say!" he boomed, addressing Marguerite, "you ought to have seen this poor boob's face when I sprung it on him that you and Dan had made it a domestic drama! I thought for a minute that he'd been gassed, or swallowed his cigarette. He was just plain green!"

This information was not entirely displeasing to the demure lady at the typewriter.

"Some improvement the well-known war has made on our lil' boy, eh what?" he continued. Marguerite replied that she found Peter to be much the same.

"Oh—do you?" said Birmingham, narrowly watching her. To himself he observed: "If you two ain't in sweet accord, I'm a bum guesser." He chuckled at the thought and they both looked at him inquiringly.

"I was just thinkin' of the lil' goddess with the starry eyes I left you with," he explained, maliciously. "What's become of her?"

"I went broke," replied Peter, with great cheerfulness, "and she returned to her—her home. She didn't care much for New York."

"I see you're heartbroken over it," grinned Birmingham. "At one time I'd have bet a week's salary it was weddin' bells for you two."

"What utter rot!" exclaimed Peter. Birmingham winked at Marguerite who thought he was not being one bit funny.

"Some lady-killer," said Birmy and saw by the tilt of her chin that he had better change the subject.

"By the way!" he cried. "I got a message for you. Maybe there's something in it for you. I ran into Arthur Baildon in front of his theater and he invited me in and told me a long story about how Helen Raville, to call her by her wrong name, had tried to do him dirt and throw the hooks into him. Said he spanked her good and then she up and confessed that one Mr. P. F. Millard had beat him to it and spanked her first for the same thing——"

"What?" exclaimed Marguerite.

"Metaphorically speakin'," said Birmingham, soothingly. "Anyway, still speakin' mythologically and symbolically, as it were, she was cuffed into behaving herself and Baildon had a natural curiosity to know who in thunder was this Millard. So maybe I didn't tell him! The whole thing came about because he knew that I was the one who picked Helen and gave her a start and he thought I'd like to know. Then, when it reached the Peter stage of the conversation, I sounded the loud trumpet till he got interested in our rising young playwright and is willing to look at any script he may care to submit. Of course he'll want to dramatize it and horn in on the authorship, but he's never killed a script that way,

yet, so you might show him something, Son. How's 'The Road to Reason' coming on?"

Birmingham learned that it was a drug on the market. The idea of hands across the sea did not appeal to play-pickers whose origin was mostly Teutonic or Slavic. They called it propaganda.

"Baildon might have the same objection," he mused. "Why not show him 'The Fifth Wheel?' But—say!" he burst out, "I passed Alfred Waller on Broadway, just now. I only know him by sight and I hear he's a hard man to reach, but if you only had an intimate friend who was an intimate friend of his to put you next, by heck, I think he'd be interested! Just his sort of play and London ought to eat it up."

Alfred Waller was a rising English producer who had made a hit with two or three American plays and was willing to repeat. Marguerite pricked up her pretty, if invisible, ears, and looked thoughtful.

"You two pests get out of here," she commanded, after a pause. "I want to finish up this script and I can do it in an hour, if you leave me alone."

"Suppose we strike while the iron's hotter than the weather outside?" suggested Birmingham. "Dig up your 'Fifth Wheel' script and I'll introduce you to the great Arthur Baildon. What say?"

"Fine idea!" agreed Marguerite. "Put on another necktie, Peter; the one you have on now is a sin and disgrace. No—your shoes don't need a shine and you never seem to need a shave!"

August in a big producer's office is a busy time, but Peter and Birmingham were admitted to the Presence without much delay. Mr. Baildon gave Peter a white and artistically slim hand and looked at him with unconcealed curiosity.

"I see you have brought a script," he said, sorrowfully. "Is it any good?"

"Kalmann paid me five hundred advance on it," replied the modest author, "but forfeited."

"Kalmann is a rotten picker," sighed Mr. Baildon, gently. Peter did not know just how to construe this. It might mean that the maligned Kalmann exercised his faulty judgment when he paid the advance, or that he made a blunder when he decided not to produce.

"I will look it over," said Mr. Baildon, wearily. "If it has a Germ, well and good. I can perform wonders with a Germ. Dress it up, cast it superlatively, Baildonize it, as the saying is. But lacking a Germ—why——"

He shrugged pessimistic shoulders.

"By the way," he added, a gleam coming into his eyes. "Thanks awfully for discouraging my damn-fool star from attempting to get away from me. She couldn't have done it in any case. My lawyer is the most expensive in New York and he earns his fees. But you nipped the revolt in the bud and for that I am grateful. God grant you may never go into production and have to handle Women. Women are the very devil—Stick to your last. Not your last woman," amended Mr. Baildon with a faint smile. "I use the term from the shoemaker's point of view. I will let you know about your little script. Address is on it, of course?"

"That's that," remarked Peter, not wholly optimistic, when he and Birmingham had emerged into the hot street. "If it gets over, you are in for an agent's commission."

"Forget it, Son," grunted Birmy. "Here's where I leave you."

When Peter returned home he found the apartment empty. Three bound scripts of "The Road to Reason" were on the typewriter stand. There should have been

four. Marguerite, evidently, had carried one away with her. He had a dinner engagement with her and he settled down to await her return, wondering why she had carried off the script.

The telephone summoned him and Marguerite's voice informed him that the dinner date was off, she was otherwise engaged—never mind with whom. Peter felt a pang of jealousy. He remembered to ask about the strangely missing script.

"Oh, that," said Marguerite's voice. "I'll tell you about that later on. Good-by." He went to a solitary dinner, feeling moody and cross. He had looked forward to dinner with her and here she was, breaking the date to dine with some other chap. Dashed mysterious about it, too. At 8 o'clock he was home again, restless and discontented. He hated to be alone.

At 8:30 Marguerite dashed in, breathless, which was strange because she had come in a taxi. She gave him a swift and unfavorable appraisal.

"Put on your Sunday clothes and hurry!" she commanded. "There's a taxi outside eating up money. And for goodness sake pick a decent tie! You want to look like a million dollars. Do hurry!"

"What's the balmy idea?" asked Peter.

"We're going up to the Astor to have a conference with Alfred Waller and I won't say another word until we've started."

"Is he the chap you dined with?" demanded Peter, but she merely pushed him toward his bedroom and scorned to reply.

In the taxi she briefly sketched her story. She had met the distinguished Mr. Waller—never mind how—had interested him in "The Road to Reason" and incidentally in Marguerite, and Mr. Waller was even now

turning the pages of the precious script, while awaiting their arrival at his suite. Peter was bewildered.

"Where did you meet him? Where did you dine? How did you get him to consider the play?" he wanted to know, all in a breath.

"It's a long story and you are hurting my hand," said Marguerite. "Peter Millard, I will NOT be kissed in a taxi! Tell me about Arthur Baildon."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN INCONCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH MR. WALLER AND WHAT HAPPENED LATER IN CHILDS' RESTAURANT.

ALFRED WALLER was bewailing the unproductiveness of the British playwright as one of the consequences of the war. He also bewailed the unavailability for London of the average Broadway output. London was going to the dogs, theatrically. He had just finished the first act of "The Road to Reason" and admitted that it contained possibilities. The Anglo-American slant was decidedly the stuff. No wonder it was caviar to the Semitic sensibilities of the Broadway show-mongers. If the other two acts held up, there was no telling. Personally it was agony for Mr. Waller to read scripts; his secretary usually read them aloud to him, but his secretary, unhappily, was not at hand. Miss—ah—our friend here had told him that Mr. Millard read extremely well. Rather an unusual gift in playwrights, more the pity.

Mr. Waller settled into a large chair and appeared to go to sleep. Peter started with the second act and had read for about ten minutes when Mr. Waller gracefully came awake.

"You are giving me quite a different angle than I got from my own cursory reading," he drawled. "I like your tempo. The touch is even more delicate than I imagined. Suppose we start at the beginning?"

Thus encouraged Peter went back to Page 1 and Mr. Waller went back to his apparent slumber.

"I catch the point," he murmured at the conclusion of the act. "I can plainly see your people. Your exposition is excellent."

At the end of the second act he sat up straight.

"God grant that the third act holds up," he piously ejaculated. "But it won't. It never does!"

"This one does," insisted Marguerite. "It has the punch of the piece, just two minutes before the curtain." She neglected to add that it was she who had suggested this punch.

Mr. Waller stayed brazenly awake during the reading of the third act. His heart rejoiced, but he was a business man. Almost as if disappointed he conceded that the little play had possibilities, but it was lighter than a feather. It would need a proper bit of casting. Damned nuisance, casting. He hemmed and occasionally he hawed, but the upshot was that he offered to take the script back with him to England provided the author would accompany him and make himself useful in the matter of casting and rehearsing and all that sort of thing. The boat sailed Saturday.

Marguerite glowed and looked at Peter. Peter maintained a reserved silence longer than she fancied. He appeared not to appreciate the tremendousness of his opportunity. Finally Peter came to life.

"Would you consider doing the play if I found it impossible to go?" he asked.

"Positively not!" declared Mr. Waller. "Without your aid it's not worth tuppence to me."

"Why—Peter!" gasped Marguerite, "What's to prevent you from going?"

"There are matters," he muttered in reply, "many matters that must be thought over and decided one way or another."

"But," she insisted, "I should think this would come first."

"Oh, no!" replied Peter, firmly. "Another matter comes first. Saturday, did you say? And this is Tuesday."

Mr. Waller became uneasy. He desperately wanted that play. Probably the author was up to Yankee tricks, fencing for terms.

"I must know by to-morrow," he said coldly. "It will be the deuce and all to book passage and there's your passport. To-morrow at the latest. As for terms—hem—haw—you may have an Authors' League contract, but the royalties are payable in pounds, mind, not dollars. Can't you possibly decide this evening?"

Peter regretted his inability to decide this evening.

"Oh, I think Mr. Millard will manage to go," cooed Marguerite, wondering what had gotten into him. She could feel things slipping.

"That Yankee Doughboy, you know," mused Mr. Waller. "We shall have to have an American for him, rough-and-ready type." The red-haired girl's confidence was reassuring. Strange he could not remember having met her. She was striking enough, surely. His memory must be failing.

"I happen to have an Authors' League contract with me," he went on, smoothly. "It gives the whole box of tricks to the author, of course; leaves nothing but the risk for the producer. Still——"

"I will let you know to-morrow," said Peter, firmly and reached for his hat.

"At what hour?"

"Oh, say 10 o'clock."

"Ten o'clock be it." Mr. Waller sighed. It would get him up early, but it was worth it.

In the lobby Marguerite turned on Peter, savagely.

"Take me somewhere and fill me full of food!" she commanded. "It's past midnight and I haven't had a mouthful since noon."

"Then you didn't dine with Waller?"

"Never laid eyes on him in my life until 7 o'clock this evening," she confessed.

"Then, how in the world——"

"Oh, I got a friend to point him out. We waited here from 3 o'clock this afternoon until he came in. Then I marched up to him and said: 'You don't remember me, do you, Mr. Waller?' and he was gentleman enough to reply that, oh, yes, indeed he did. What boobs men are! I vamped him right off his feet and before he knew it he was holding a script in his hands and I had a date to bring around the gifted author. He's still wondering who the deuce I am. Let's go to 43d Street. Childs' is good enough. I want two dollars worth of corned beef hash; got that much on you? Oh, I forgot: They charge extra for bread and butter, the pirates!"

In the white-enameled restaurant, after the edge of fierce hunger had been appeased, she abruptly attacked him.

"What's all this nonsense about putting off a decision until to-morrow, when you know darned well you could have said 'yes' and signed a contract to-night? There isn't any other answer possible."

"Oh, yes there is," insisted Peter.

"I don't think you fully appreciate what I've done for you."

"But, I do! You are a marvel—the most marvelous and miraculous—in other words, a marvel."

"Then why didn't you tell him you'd go with him Saturday?"

"Because I didn't know and I don't know now. It all depends."

"Depends?" she demanded. "Depends on what?"

"I am eager and willing to start for Europe on Saturday," announced Peter, "provided you go with me. Otherwise I'll chuck the whole business."

"Peter Millard!" she cried, wildly.

"There you have it," said Peter.

"But—I can't possibly go!"

"I feared as much. I will telephone my declination at 10 o'clock to-morrow morning."

"You will do nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Marguerite in a panic.

"That's so! Why wait?" A bright idea occurred to him. "Since that is your definite decision, I can telephone him right now. He can't have gone to bed yet. Hasn't had time."

He pushed back his chair as if to rise. She gripped his elbow.

"Don't be crazy!" she implored. "Waller won't take the play without you."

"So I gathered from his conversation." Peter was tantalizingly suave and unruffled.

"And you will deliberately destroy this chance? Your *only* chance to get anywhere, just because of an utterly silly notion?"

"I'll tell you what, darling," said Peter, his eyes lighting with something of a glitter, "I don't intend to put the Atlantic Ocean between you and me, now or ever. I have asked you several times to marry me and you have only laughed. Well, laugh away and have a gay and giddy life, for I intend to continue at intervals to ask you to marry me until you do, or until one of us passes away of old age. And that's that."

She saw that he meant it, with all his soul he meant it.

"I—I can't go with you," she whimpered. "It wouldn't be proper."

"Oh!" said Peter, scandalized. "We'd be married first, of course."

"But this is Wednesday morning and the boat leaves Saturday."

"It doesn't take that long to get married," murmured Peter.

"I haven't a thing to wear," said Marguerite.

"Pardon me," he corrected her, "you are wearing something now; rather fetching, too," he added, appraising her with adoring eyes. It happened that she had put on her most becoming gown with which to capture the interest of Mr. Waller.

"And if I don't go," she fenced, "you will spoil everything and let the Waller contract slide?"

"Irrevocably," said Peter.

Marguerite was silent for a long, lingering moment.

"Will you let me say 'damn' once a month?" she asked.

"Once a fortnight!" offered Peter, feeling very triumphant.

Again she was silent and thoughtful. Her eyes grew tender. She could no longer question the depth of his love for her, without her he did not even consider success! Then the situation struck her sense of humor and she suddenly laughed, a long rippling laugh.

"Laugh away," said Peter, grimly, "I am accustomed to it."

"You do choose the most——" gurgled Marguerite.

He glanced at her inquiringly.

"You are the only man in the world," said Marguerite, "who would deliberately pick a Childs' restaurant on a busy night to propose to a girl in!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

AFFAIRS MOVE RAPIDLY FOR EVERYBODY CONCERNED AND BIRMINGHAM ACQUIRES SOMEBODY TO CUT HIS MEAT UP TO SUIT HIM

MR. WALLER was not fully awake when Peter presented himself on the stroke of 10, to sign his contract and receive his cheque for advance royalty, but he proceeded rapidly to become awake as the ceremonies advanced. It had been agreed that Mr. Waller was to stand the expense of transplanting Peter from New York to London.

"There is a slight complication," coughed Peter, embarrassed. "You see, I shall be accompanied by my wife and, of course, I shall pay for her transportation. It's a matter of auditing the bill and—ah——"

"Your wife?" murmured Mr. Waller, sleepily.

"The lady who was with us last evening."

"Dear me," said Mr. Waller, "I had no idea you were married."

"We're not," replied Peter, pleasantly.

Mr. Waller rubbed his eyes and gave indications of alarm.

"We shall be, at 3 o'clock this afternoon," explained Peter. "It was that little matter that caused me to—ah—hesitate last night. But she saw my point of view."

Mr. Waller offered well-bred congratulations.

"Another thing," went on Peter, "you were speaking

of an American player for that Yankee Doughboy. I know the very chap. Name of Birmingham."

"Birmingham?" mused Mr. Waller, yawning and searching his memory.

"Hasn't played on Broadway much," said Peter, "but he is a regular trooper, as we say over here. I don't insist on him, of course, but I am sure he would fit the part perfectly."

"Birmingham it is, then," agreed Mr. Waller.

"By the way," said Peter, "he has only one arm."

Mr. Waller gave his second start of alarm.

"Usual number of legs, I hope?" he anxiously inquired.

"Oh, quite; but only one arm. Lost the other in the war. Not bad publicity matter, I should say."

This aspect of the case appealed to Mr. Waller.

On his way home Peter suddenly thought of Mr. Baildon and "The Fifth Wheel" and sheered off toward the Baildon playhouse. The eminent producer and he collided at the theater entrance.

"I read your play last night," volunteered Mr. Baildon. "Come in. It is terrible. I want to talk to you about it."

In the office Baildon fixed him with an accusing eye.

"How did you come to write such unutterable rot?" he demanded, plaintively.

"It was in my system and it had to come out," said Peter. "I sail for London Saturday with Alfred Waller. He is to do a little thing of mine. So if you will let me have my script back I'll toddle along and thank you for reading it."

"It is unutterable rot," persisted Mr. Baildon, "*but*—it has the Germ! I was going to propose that you let me make a play of it."

The upshot was that Peter formally consented, on

paper, to permit Mr. Baildon to make a play of "The Fifth Wheel" and pocketed a cheque.

They were well at sea. Mr. and Mrs. Peter Fillmore Millard occupied the bridal suite, made available at the last moment by the vagaries of a young lady who changed her mind about getting married. Birmingham was less fortunate and had to go second cabin.

The third day out brought a sensation. Birmingham encountered a sad-faced gray-haired woman who stared at him as at a ghost.

"Hello, Madge," grinned Birmingham.

"Your—your arm?" exclaimed the woman. Birmy looked sheepish.

"I left it in France, last trip over," he explained. "But I heard about a feller in London who makes corking good understudies. You can wiggle the fingers and everything."

Later he communicated the news to Peter.

"Madge always was a ministering angel," he said. "When she saw my starboard wing missing it was all over but the details. That shrimp had died on her, years ago; the one I beat up. She went through the war in the Red Cross; I might have known it. And do you know, Son, once we were only five miles apart, over there! Ain't it a small world? It was on the twenty-ninth of August, our weddin' anniversary. That's how we identified it. Well, she's got her seat changed and from now on I'll get my meat cut to suit me. I stood up with you in New York and maybe you won't mind playing walking gent in my lil' starring engagement in London, before the first priest we can locate. Seems kind of funny, marryin' your own wife, eh, what?"

CHAPTER XXX.

PETER TAKES DUE PRECAUTIONS SO THAT IF IT IS A BOY, HE SHALL NOT SUFFER FROM ANY AVOIDABLE HANDICAP IN THE MATTER OF NATIONALITY.

THE London success of "The Road to Reason" is as much history as is the New York hit scored by Arthur Baildon's exquisite production of "The Superfluous One," originally called "The Fifth Wheel." The serene and placid author of both successes spent a good bit of his time journeying from one to the other, always accompanied by his wife, on whose judgment he relied so implicitly that he would hardly venture an opinion on the weather without first consulting her.

It was during one of the London sojourns that he encountered Mr. Dan De Freece, of the Straus offices, who was there with a cablegram in his pocket empowering him to go the limit in the matter of acquiring the American rights to "The Road to Reason."

Mr. De Freece was complaining wearily of the exorbitant terms demanded.

"You know, Old Chap," said Peter, breezily, "Straus could have had the piece for a nickel a year ago. But he didn't even reply to the letter I wrote offering it."

"It's all in the game," sighed De Freece, seeing something over Peter's head which was not there. "It was a mistake, though, to ignore your letter. I always said you had the makings. Why didn't you give us a chance at "The Superfluous One?"

"I did," smiled Peter. "But when it was 'The Fifth Wheel' it didn't fall in with your plans."

"We had no Helen Raville to give it distinction," explained Mr. De Freece. "Yes, it's all in the game."

"By the way," said Mr. De Freece, concealing his earnestness with a half-yawn, "I had rather hoped to have the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Millard, this trip." He glanced covertly at the successful husband and playwright.

Peter's eyes grew a bit tender.

"She's not going about much, just now," he explained. "And she's fearfully busy getting ready for our return home. We start next week. It will be our last journey for some time. We are—ah—expecting a rather early arrival and we must hurry back to God's country."

De Freece did not appear clearly to understand.

"Don't you see?" explained Peter, amiably. "If it should turn out to be a boy I want him to have every advantage. I want him to have his jolly old crack at the presidency, the same as any other natural born citizen of the sovereign United States, what?"

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